Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

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Jaune always did love telling stories, especially to his younger sisters. He even had a book filled with cheesy horror stories that his sisters loved. But after coming to Beacon, he thought he would never tell stories again. However, that wasn't the case when Ruby began asking him for stories, soon followed by Nora. Little did he know that this would cause a domino effect.

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Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12

Chapter 1

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Chapter 1: The Headless Ghost

"ANOTHER!" The younger reaper known as Ruby Rose shouted.

"Are you sure, Ruby? I mean, it is already getting close to midnight. While we don't have any class tomorrow as it's Saturday, I don't want to risk angering Yang." I asked nervously.

"Risk angering Yang for what?" A new voice asked. Looking up, we saw the hyper-active, hammer-wielding member of Team Jnpr skipping towards us before sitting down next to Ruby.

"Hey, Nora." I said, smiling when I noticed that she was wearing her favorite sloth pajamas. And in her hands was the stuff sloth plush that Ren won for her in a contest last week.

Currently, we were in my dorm room about to go to sleep. Well, I was about to but couldn't when Ruby came into my dorm and asked for another story. Ren and Pyrrha were not here with us. Ren was with Fox and Yatsuhashi as part of an assignment where Beacon sent first-year students on a mission with second-year students. On the other hand, Pyrrha was back in Mistral for a promotion event from her sponsors and to visit her family. As such, Team Rwby, Nora, Coco, and Velvet decided to have a slumber party for the next few days. Although to be more accurate, Yang, Ruby, Nora, and Coco decided to have the slumber party with the others being dragged into it. This meant that I had the entire dorm room to myself. But, I didn't mind it as I enjoyed the solitude. After all, spending nearly fifteen years living together with seven sisters and sharing just about everything makes you appreciate alone time. But, before I could fall asleep, Ruby zoomed into the dorm and asked if I could tell her a story. This isn't the first time, however, as Ruby began coming to me

after a month of being at Beacon so I could tell her stories. Although, at first, it was only bedtime stories when she had difficulty falling asleep and her usual methods didn't work. But after a while and an embarrassing incident, she learned that I also had cheesy horror stories. And since then, she only wanted me to tell her cheesy horror stories, which, thankfully, I had plenty on me.

"Hey, fearless leader. Hey, Ruby. What are you both doing?" Nora asked, curious.

"Jaune was about to tell me another story." Ruby said, excited.

"Ruby. It's getting-"

"A STORY! WHAT KIND!?" Nora shouted, now as excited as Ruby.

"A cheesy horror kind. You know the good ones where you might get a scare but are just so great." Ruby answered.

"Ruby, I-"

"I LOVE THOSE STORIES! WHAT STORY ARE YOU GOING TO TELL NEXT!?" Nora shouted, stars in her eyes as she got comfy and looked at me with child-like wonder.

"Um-" I began, unsure should I continue and risk Yang's anger or stop and see Nora and Ruby's upset. However, before I could finish what I was saying, Nora and Ruby did one of the few things I was still weak against after all these years.

"Please." They both said while giving me the biggest puppy-dog eyes I had ever seen in my entire life. Knowing that they had me in the palm of their hands, I relented with a sigh as I stood up from my bed.

"Alright. What story would you two like to hear?" I asked as I kneeled, reached under my bed, and pulled out a case.

"A ghost story." Ruby answered.

"OH! A HAUNTED HOUSE GHOST STORY!" Nora added.

"Alright. Going need to be a little more specific, though." I said as I opened the case and pulled out an ancient and worn-looking book.

"What's that, Jaune-Jaune?" Nora asked, curious yet excited.

"A book I made in arts and craft a long time ago. I never really had a use for it for the longest time. But now, I use it to write down stories." I explained as I began to flip through the pages.

"Who's that dummy on the cover?" Ruby asked, curious.

"And what's behind it?" Nora asked. Closing the book, I turned it around to show them the cover.

"Oh, that's Slappy the Dummy. And behind him is the entrance to Horror Land, a theme park that's been dubbed as the scariest place on Remnant." I answered before opening up the book and flipping through the pages. "So, what story did you two want to hear again?"

"A HAUNTED HOUSE GHOST STORY!" They shouted.

"All right. I got a couple, though." I told them. "How does this sound? Hill House; the biggest tourist attraction in town. That's because it's haunted, haunted by the ghost of a thirteen-year-old boy. A boy with no head! Duane and Stephanie love Hill House. It's dark. And creepy. And totally scary. Still, they've never actually seen the ghost. Until the night they decide to go on a search. A search for his head..."

"THAT SOUNDS AWESOME!" They answered.

"Alright. But try and keep it down as I don't want the others to hear us." I told them.

"Right." They said, not really paying attention as they were eagerly awaiting for me to start the story. Chuckling, I flipped through the book to the correct page where the story was. Honestly, seeing their

smiling faces reminded me of my younger sisters when I told them stories before tucking them into their beds. Well, before I left to come here to Beacon.

"Okay. We start with our two main characters, Duane and Stephanie. They are good friends and live in the uninteresting town of Wheeler Falls. They love to pull pranks on everyone in the town, especially during the tours of Hill House. And Hill House is notorious for its rich history and supposed rumors of being haunted..."

Story

"Are you here?" A young boy wearing old-fashioned clothes asked while looking out his window. He then began looking around his room, almost as if he was trying to find something only he knew was there. "If you're here, show yourself."

Yet, nothing but the sounds of strong winds, heavy rain, thunder, and lightning answered the boy's questioning. However, the boy was not disturbed by this and started moving about his room, keeping his senses sharp, hoping he would receive the answer he wanted. But as the seconds went by, the boy began to become impatient at not getting the response he wanted.

"Where are you?" The boy asked again, wondering if what he was looking for was real or not. However, had he not been so focused on trying to find what he wanted, he would have heard loud footsteps rushing towards his room.

"ANDREW, WHY AREN'T YOU IN BED?" Andrew's mother asked, annoyed as she came into the room while holding a lit candle.

"I was just going, mama." Andrew lied, shivering in trepidation at what punishment his mother might give him for breaking curfew.

"Mm-hmm. That's a likely story." The mother said, disapproval on her face. "You were looking for that ghost again, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't, Mama. Honest." Andrew said, hoping his mother would believe him so she wouldn't punish him later. Yet, by the look on her face, it was apparent she didn't fall for the lie.

"I don't know why you believe in those stories. There is no ghost in this house. Now go to bed." The mother ordered, sounding exasperated at her son.

"I will, Mama. I promise. Good night, Mama." Andrew said, sounding ashamed. Sighing, the mother nodded before exiting the room and closing the door. However, as soon as the door closed, Andrew grew irritated and annoyed.

"Come out, you stupid old ghost. I'm not afraid of you." Andrew declared, hoping to trick or tempt the supposed ghost out of wherever it was. But as soon as he said this, Andrew heard the sounds of a cat screeching from under his bed. Confused, Andrew kneeled to see what was the cause of the noise.

"Oh. It's only you, kitty." He said, relieved that it was only his cat. Yet, as soon as he said this, fear rushed into Andrew, and the cat's bodies as a strong wind blew all the candles out. Quickly getting up, Andrew looked around and saw that all the candles were snuffed out.

"Who's there?" He asked, fear laced in his voice. Almost as if to answer his question, a loud, bone-chilling sound echoed through his room. Looking up, Andrew noticed a weird yet horrifying black and white striped mass hovering in the corner ceiling of his room.

"No!" Andrew gasped before screaming in terror when hands started to form and reached towards him.

"Now that you have seen me, you cannot leave." The bone-chilling voice, which sounded like an aged man, declared as the weird mass began to take the shape of a man.

"Please." Andrew begged, trying not to collapse in fear or scream as the man's hands inched closer to him.

Real World

"AND WHAT HAPPENED NEXT!?" Nora asked, snapping my attention from the book to her.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"What happened next, Jaune? Did the ghost catch the boy? Did it kill him?" Ruby asked. Turning to her, I noticed that she seemed both excited and scared at the story. Although I couldn't help but smile and internally chuckle when I saw her hugging both the cookie plushie, I got her and Zwei tightly.

"I was getting to that. Try not to interrupt too much as I don't want to lose track. But feel free to ask questions if you need me to clarify something." I told them.

"Okay." They said while leaning closer. Smiling, I looked down at the book and quickly found where I had left off.

"Right. So-" I began.

Story

"And then what happened? What did the ghost do?" An elderly lady asked, both intrigued and slightly scared. Along with ten other people, she was currently in what appeared to be an old-fashioned living room. They were taking a tour in the infamous Hill House. The house was notorious for the supposed restless spirits that haunt it.

"This ghost pulled Andrew's head off and hid it somewhere in the house." The tour guide, an elderly male, answered as he walked to the other side of the room. Yet, despite telling them the supposed history of one of the ghosts haunting Hill House, it was apparent that

everyone was having a grand time. "And every night since then, Andrew's ghost wanders these halls searching..."

"For his head." A young male finished simultaneously to the tour guide. However, it seemed like he was doing this to scare the young children that were also part of the tour.

"It's just a story. It's all part of the tour." A mother told her young daughter in hopes of calming her down.

"And now, if you would all follow me, we will view the rest of the house." The tour guide announced before heading towards the stairs on the opposite side of the room. "And who knows? Perhaps tonight, the headless boy-"

"AAHHH!" The young girl from before suddenly screamed, getting everyone's attention.

"Is she all right?" One of the adults currently present asked, worried.

"Get her out of there." Another added, equally worried. Yet, everyone became tired and annoyed when they saw what had scared the young girl. It was a fake monster hand coming from under a table next to her.

"COME OUT OF THERE!" The tour guide demanded as he rushed over to the table. It was apparent that he knew what was happening and had seen it countless times beforehand. He grabbed the hand and pulled on it, forcing the owner, which turned out to be a teenage girl, out from under the table. Yet, despite being caught, the girl was smiling, almost as if she enjoyed scaring and possibly scarring the young girl. "COME OUT OF THERE RIGHT NOW!"

"Got ya." The girl said while showing the young girl the fake monster arm before bursting into laughter again. However, what was noticeable was the young male from earlier seemed tired and annoyed at the girl. Almost as if wondering why he still puts up with the girl. This was evident by how he shook his head in disapproval

when the girl continued to laugh at the young girl that she had scared.

"THAT'S IT! YOU TWO OUT!" The tour guide shouted, infuriated as he grabbed the teenagers' arms and led them out of the room and eventually out of the house altogether.

"Come on; it was just a prank." The girl said, yet it was clear that she wasn't sorry and enjoyed scaring the little girl. This caused the tour guide to become disgusted by her attitude.

"One of these days, you local kids will realize that the spirits who haunt this house do not appreciate pranks. Out with you now, and don't come back until you're willing to show Hill House the proper respect." The tour guide told them before turning around, entering the house, and closing the door behind him. But, had he been paying attention, he would have noticed that the girl was laughing madly as she and her friend left the property.

Real World

"Jaune." Nora said, getting my attention.

"Yes." I said, looking up from the book while keeping my finger on the line so I won't lose track of where I was.

"Why did those two scare that little kid?" She asked.

"And why did the girl seem to enjoy it too much while her friend seemed tired of the pranks?" Ruby added, curious. Even Zwei seemed curious as he tilted his head to the side.

"They are Duane and Stephanie. They are the resident pranksters of Wheeler Falls and have been friends for the longest time. But, their favorite spot to pull pranks at is Hill House. However, after years of pranking people, Duane no longer feels the same joy as before. Plus, he's starting to think that Stephanie's pranks are getting out of

hand while she doesn't care as long as she gets a good laugh." I explained.

"They seem really mean. Hopefully, someone teaches them a lesson." Ruby said with Zwei barking in agreement.

"Oh, don't worry. Something will." I said with a chuckle as I shifted my back to the book. "Now. Back to the story. As Duane and Stephanie left the property, Stephanie could not control herself and let out a laugh at what she considered a successful and hilarious prank."

Story

"That was excellent! Did you see the look on the little girl's face?" Stephanie asked as they left the property of Hill House, all the while showing Duane the fake monster arm.

"We went too far that time. She was really scared." Duane argued, the image of the scared girl almost crying still fresh in his mind. However, this did not sit well with Stephanie.

"That's the point, Duane. The twin terrors of Wheels Falls strike again." Stephanie declared as thunder rumbled in the background.

"Maybe we are getting too old for this twin terror stuff." Duane hesitantly said while trying to come up with a way to convince Stephanie to stop pulling pranks.

"ARE YOU NUTS!? We're just getting good." Stephanie said, shocked at what she was hearing. However, her expression changed when a plan came to mind. "I know. Let's come back tomorrow night. We can sneak away from the tour and look for the head of the headless ghost."

"I don't know." Duane replied, unconvinced and sounding tired of all the ideas Stephanie had.

"What? All of a sudden, you're afraid of ghosts?" Stephanie mocked, knowing what buttons she needed to push to get Duane on her side. However, had they not been so focused on their conversation and arguing with each other, they would have noticed that someone was watching them from the second floor of Hill House.

"You heard what Otto said. The-the ghosts don't appreciate-" Duane began before being cut off.

"You believe that?" Stephanie asked in disbelief.

"I didn't say that. I just-" Duane stuttered, seemingly trying to convince himself rather than Stephanie.

"You what?" She asked, knowing that she got him where she wanted.

"Well-"

"Are you scared?"

"No." Duane answered, albeit a bit too high-pitched that told Stephanie that he was lying. Knowing that she got him, she wrapped her arm around him to try and seal the deal.

"It'll be great. Tomorrow night, Hill House will definitely be haunted... by us." Stephanie declared before laughing hysterically. She then tugged Duane away, possibly to their house for the night. But, had they not been so busy arguing, they would have noticed a figure standing in the bushes close by them. The light from the lightning revealed that it was a young male around Stephanie and Duane's ages.

The Next Day

"The history of this house is one of madness and despair. 'Twas over one hundred and fifty years ago that a sea captain built this house for his lady love. When he came back from a sea voyage, he found

his beloved had left him for another man. The poor captain died of a broken heart, but his enraged spirit lived on, taking revenge upon anyone who dared live in this house. And upon anyone who mocked the ghosts within." The tour guide said, finishing the story behind one of the ghosts behind Hill House hauntings. And as he finished, he moved to stand behind Stephanie and Duane. "Well, I'm glad to see our regulars have decided to behave themselves tonight. For their own sake."

Little did Otto know, that was only wishful thinking. Had he known what Stephanie and Duane were up to, he would have thrown them out of the house immediately. He then motioned for the rest of the tour to follow him to the adjacent room.

"Each of these portraits represents some poor soul who tried to live in this house and then died a horrible and grisly death. And now, if you will follow me up to the guest room, you will hear the bloody story of a ghost named Andrew." Otto said as he and the rest followed him up the stairs to the second floor.

But at the tail end of the group, Duane and Stephanie stayed at the first step and looked at the painting of a young boy holding his head. Yet, instead of admiring the artwork, Stephanie stuck her tongue out to mock it and the supposed ghosts that reside in Hill House. On the other hand, Duane scoffed, getting more and more tired with Stephanie and her attitude with each passing second. They then resumed walking up the stairs before looking around for the rest of the tour. Luckily, they quickly found them in a nearby room where Otto was telling the others another ghost story.

"Thet ghost's long, icy fingers stretched toward-" They hear Otto say. Yet, instead of entering the room, they stayed right beside the door.

"Now's our chance. Come on." Stephanie whispered as she quietly snuck by the room. Yet, Duane merely walked as he didn't see any point in being sneaky. "Come on."

"What did the ghost do?" A young boy was heard asking Otto as Stephanie and Duane climbed over the stanchion placed to prevent guests from wandering into prohibited areas of the house.

"The ghost pulled the boy's head off." Otto answered.

"Come on. Let's go look for Andrew's head." Stephanie said, annoyed when she noticed that Duane hesitated to follow her. Luckily for her at least, Duane quickly climbed over the stanchion and followed her down the hall. Had they not been in such a hurry, they would have heard a nearby door creaking open. And behind it was the same boy that watched them from the bushes the previous night.

"Wow." Stephanie said, amazed as she opened the door to the attic of Hill House. Inside the room was a multitude of furniture, each spanning numerous years since they were created or placed here in the house's attic. But as Duane entered the room, the first thing he noticed was the items that seemed to belong to a sailor or captain. I the back of his mind, the story of the dead captain surfaced, making him wonder if he should continue to leave.

"I think this place is off-limits." Duane said, noticing the do not enter sign on the door.

"Who cares?" Stephanie asked in a mocking tone as she moved to close the door so they won't be bothered. And as Duane moved back to not get hit by the door, he accidentally bumped into the desk behind him. After making sure nothing fell to the floor, they began looking around for Andrew's head.

"This must have been the sea captain's study." Stephanie said, getting Duane's attention. Looking over to her, he noticed that she had picked up a ship-in-a-bottle. It was then he saw, thanks to the light, the hanging shark teeth on the wall.

"Let's get out of here." He said, trying not to panic.

"Not until we find the head." Stephanie reminded, uncaring at this point for Daune's opinion. Then, almost as if to spite him, she walked over to the other side of the room and, in a mocking tone, asked. "Hmm. Is it here? Nah."

Duane, realizing what she was doing, began to take steps back to the door, with his breathing becoming more labored by the second. Yet, his fear and anxiety kept him from leaving the room as Stephanie moved over to the nearby chair.

"How about here? Nope." She said with a smug grin and teasing tone as she moved the pillows. Then, she turned around while glossing over some other knick-knacks that seemed to belong to the dead captain. However, her face turned to one of terror. "Oh, no. Oh, no."

"What?" Duane asked, worried for their safety as he made his way to stand next to her.

"The- the head." She answered.

"Where?" Duane asked, curious as he stood in front of her.

"Nowhere, you sucker! Are you going to fall for every dumb trick tonight?" Stephanie asked in disbelief, yet was enjoying making Duane look like an idiot.

"Come on, Stephanie. Don't do that." He said, exasperated as she moved across the room again.

"Duane, this time, I'm not kidding." Stephanie said, taking on a serious tone as she opened a closet door.

"What?" He asked, afraid.

"Look." She answered.

"Where? Is it the head?" Duane asked as he moved next to her. But instead of answering, she tried to control her laughter while patting

his shoulder. "Oh, man. I can't believe I fell for that twice."

Real World

"I really don't like Stephanie. Why doesn't Duane just leave?" Ruby asked, snapping my attention from the book to her.

"Yeah. I'm hoping the ghost actually takes her head." Nora added.

"Well, they have been friends for a long time, and he doesn't want to abandon her just like that. Plus, despite being scared, he is also slightly curious about if they could actually find Andrew's missing head." I explained.

"Still don't like her." They simultaneously said, with Zwei nodding in agreement.

'And I still don't think Zwei is a regular dog.' I thought, concerned as the dog seemed to understand everything far better than one would expect. "Anyway, back to the story. Being annoyed with himself for falling for the same trick twice, Duane was about to try and convince Stephanie to leave the room. However, before he could do so, he heard a loud thump from nearby."

Story

"What was that?" Duane asked, worried that it was the ghost or Otto. He then moved to the doors to see if he could spot the source.

"Don't even try it." Stephanie said, still laughing and thinking he was trying to get her back.

"No. Shh. Listen." He told her as the sound of footsteps could be heard getting louder.

"Something's coming." She said, becoming serious as she moved to turn off the desk lamp. However, despite turning off the lights, they still had to find a hiding spot.

"What do we do?" Duane asked, trying not to panic.

"Quick, in the closet." Stephanie whispered before moving to stand inside the closet, with Duane following right behind.

For the next couple of minutes, everything was tense. All they could hear were the sounds of footsteps approaching and lightning and thunder outside the house. Yet, from how quiet and tense the situation was, they could swear some of the stuffed animals in the roar were also making noise. And with how quiet they were, the footsteps seemed to echo and grow louder as they neared their location. And after a few moments, the footsteps stopped, but to their horror, they stopped where they were. Soon, they heard the sounds of keys jiggling with the door opening a moment later. Looking towards the floor, they saw the shadow of a man moving towards the close they were using a hiding spot. For the briefest of moments, they hoped the person would move away from their place. Unfortunately, the closet doors opened a second later with a displeased Otto on the other side.

A Few Minutes Later

"You are no longer welcome at Hill House. And if you should ever come back, I shall not be responsible for what the spirits may do. You have no respect." Otto said as he pushed the two teens out of the house before closing the door.

"RESPECT THIS, YOU OLD GROUCH!" Stephanie shouted as she grabbed some snow and threw it at the door.

"DON'T! Duane shouted, trying to stop, but it was too late as she had already thrown the snowball. But had they been paying attention to the house, they would have noticed the doorknocker's eyes glow a menacing bright green for a moment while letting out a threatening growl.

"Why did you do that for?" Duane asked, annoyed.

"You know, Duane, you're getting to be a real drag." Stephanie said, pissed that her fun was cut short tonight and now can no longer prank at Hill House.

"I'm a drag?" Duan said, insulted. "You know, you never know when to stop, do you, Stephanie?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She said, not caring what Duane was saying.

"Never mind. Let's just get out of here." Duane said, tired as the sounds of thunder and dogs barking could be heard all around them. Sighing in defeat, they turned around and were about to head back home but stopped and gasped in terror when they saw someone standing mere feet from them.

"Do you wanna see real ghosts?" He asked, smiling.

"Who are you?" Duane asked, curious but also concerned.

"My name's Seth."

"I'm Stephanie."

"And I'm D-D-"

"And this is Duane." Stephanie finished, trying not to laugh.

"I heard you guys talking last night. If you wanna see the headless ghost, you have to wait for the house to close up and all the tourists to go home. That's when the real stuff happens." Seth told them.

"And how do you know?" Stephanie asked, curious.

"I sneaked in... late one night." Seth answered before quickly pulling them over to a nearby bush when he heard the door to Hill House creak open. "Quick. Over here."

"Please come again." They heard Otto say as he bid the guest goodnight.

"That was great." Some of the guests said as they left the property and headed back to their cars or homes.

"I know this way in through the basement." Seth said, getting Duane and Stephanie's attention. "Shall we sneak in tonight?"

"Yes, let's do it." Stephanie answered, excited.

"Tonight?" Duane asked, sounding scared and unsure. "Maybe tomorrow would be better."

"Well, if D-D-Duane doesn't want to, he doesn't have to." Seth said, knowing what to say to get Duane to tag along. "After all. It's not everybody who can handle a real ghost hunt."

"I can handle it." Stephanie said, excited at being able to hunt for Andrew's head.

"I didn't say I couldn't handle it." Duane said, trying and failing to show that he wasn't scared.

"So, are we on for tonight?" Seth asked, smiling.

"HECK YEAH!" Stephanie answered, barely able to contain her rising excitement.

"Duane?" Seth asked, turning to him.

"Come on, Duane." Stephanie said, trying to encourage him.

"It'd be a real adventure." Seth added.

"Okay." Duane said, relenting.

"YES!" Stephanie cheered at having her friend with her.

"Hill House awaits." Seth said before all three turned to look at the now eerie-looking house with thunder clapping overhead.

Real World

"Wait." Ruby said, interrupting the story. Looking up, I saw her get up before zooming out of the room. I was confused for a moment but smiled when she came back, holding a plate of cookies and milk for everyone to share. "Okay. Continue."

"It was nearing midnight. Stephanie, Duane, and their guide Seth were now in the basement of Hill House. However, they soon ran into the problem of not being able to see since it was so dark, and they didn't want to turn on the lights and risk drawing attention. Luckily, Seth came prepared with some matches and candles."

Story

"Shh." Seth told Duane and Stephanie as he blew out the match. But seeing Duane scared, he decided to have some fun. "We don't want to wake the spirits... yet. Come on."

With that said, the trio began making their way throughout Hill House. But as they made their way to the main floor and up the stairs to the second floor, they could not help but feel that Hill House became unsettling. Almost as if it was expecting them to be here at this hour. The paintings and the darkness combined did not help as it made it seem that the artwork was watching them. Add in the sounds of the creaking floorboards, and it proved almost too much for Duane. Luckily, they soon reached the second floor and entered the room they had never been in before.

"I've never seen this part of the house before." Stephanie said as she looked around the room.

"It's not on the tour." Duane explained, equally scared but intrigued.

"None of these rooms are on the tour." Seth added, scaring Duane, causing him to back up and bump into a table, causing everything on it to fall to the floor.

"Smooth move." Stephanie scolded.

"Sorry." Duane whispered, trying to calm himself down. But the wind howling and thunder rumbling outside did not make it any easier.

"What's this?" Stephanie asked, moving to the wall and turning a wheel.

"It's called a dumbwaiter. Goes all the way up to the attic." Seth answered as he moved to stand in front of it. "It was used to bring food up from the kitchen. You see, a long time ago, there was a boy who lived in this room."

"Andrew?" Stephanie asked, curious. "The boy who lost his head?"

"No. A different boy. A very spoiled boy." Seth answered.

Seth's Story

We hear an old-fashioned bell ringing in what looks like an old kitchen.

'A very spoiled boy who loves to eat ice cream. Strawberry ice cream.'

What seems like a maid is seen entering the kitchen and moving towards the fridge. She opened it and pulled out a large metal container with strawberry ice cream. She then grabbed an ice cream scoop and used it to fill a sundae glass with about five scoops.

'Ice cream. Ice cream. He always wanted ice cream.'

The maid then licked her fingers clean of any residual ice cream before moving the sundae to a plate with napkins. Grabbing the spoon next to it, she inserted it into the ice cream before bringing the entire thing to the dumbwaiter.

'And he kept the kitchen maid hopping with his demands.'

The maid then opened the dumbwaiter before putting the ice cream in it and closing the door. She then spun the wheel to have the dumbwaiter bring the ice cream up to the boy.

'Ice cream. He just couldn't get enough ice cream.'

A young boy opens the dumbwaiter door and takes the sundae before closing the door again. And before taking each bite of ice cream, the young boy licks his lips, eagerly awaiting the sweet treat he was about to enjoy.

Story

"Well, one day, the dumbwaiter didn't come all the way up." Seth continued as all the three of them took a seat to better listen to the story.

Seth's Story

'The boy reached... and he reached... until finally, he reached too far.'

The young boy opened the dumbwaiter and didn't see his ice cream. Figuring he could reach it, he began to reach down into the dumbwaiter shaft, hoping to grab his ice cream. Unfortunately, he leaned too far in and fell down the dumbwaiter shaft. Hearing something, the maid opened the dumbwaiter and became horrified at seeing the young boy dead in the dumbwaiter.

'When the maid found him at the bottom of the shaft, it was hard to tell the difference between the boy's face...'

The maid screamed as she looked over the mess and the young boy's dead body. She could hardly make out the difference between the ice cream and the boy's face. Horrified, she began screaming in sheer terror.

Story

"And the strawberry ice cream." Seth said, finishing the story.

"Gross." Daune said, trying to stay calm.

"Some say that the boy fell. Others say he was pushed... by a ghost." Seth added, trying to scare Duane as he looked towards him.

"That's just a story." Stephanie said, annoyed as she got up from her chair. "You said you were going to show us real ghosts."

"Do you think you're really ready?" Seth asked as if he enjoyed Stephanie's impatience in seeing a real ghost.

"Yes." She answered without missing a beat.

"Duane?" He asked, turning to him as thunder roared outside. "You don't have to come."

Yet, he kept quiet as he didn't want to continue. But he didn't have a chance to answer or contemplate as Duane and Stephanie got up and left the room. And as she passed him, Stephanie threw Duane an exasperated and disappointed look. Yet, before he could say anything, he heard the sound of something turning. Looking to the dumbwaiter, he saw that the wheel was turning by itself. He turned back to the others, not wanting to find out if it was a ghost or something else that was turning the wheel.

"I'll come." He said before moving to stand next to the others.

"Then we'll have to go one flight up..." Seth said before opening the door in front of him. "...To the captain's secret room."

Stepping inside, they were greeted by an old, worn, concrete spiral staircase. After a couple of minutes of climbing up the stairs, they saw a door to the next floor. However, they did have to duck to enter as it was an unusually small door.

"Come on, Duane." Stephanie said, urging him to go faster. But once he was inside, they became amazed at what they saw. Paintings and

canvases were scattered about all over the room. Yet, they felt something tense in the air as they looked around.

"What's this for?" Duane asked as he took out a palette and showed it to Seth.

"Oh. They say that the captain's ghost paints a portrait of his latest victim." Seth said as he set down the candle before taking out a key. He then moved over to lock the door. Not liking where this was going, Duane put the palette down.

"It's getting late. Maybe we should be heading back." He said, scared.

"I'm sorry. Can't let you leave." Seth said in a tone that surprised Duane.

"What are you talking about?" Stephanie asked, confused.

"Why-why did you lock the door, Seth?" Duane asked while taking a step back.

"I lied to you. My name isn't Seth. It's Andrew." He explained, gaining a shocked expression from Stephanie. "It's been Andrew for over a hundred years."

"But you can't be Andrew. Andrew lost his head." Stephanie said but went quiet at the end when *Andrew* turned in her direction.

"This isn't my head. I borrowed it. But I have to return it. And so, I'll need a new head." He explained before turning back to Duane. "And guess what, Duane? I'm going to take yours. I need your head, Duane."

"I need it too." Duane said, nearly paralyzed in fear as he walked back.

"It won't hurt. Well, maybe just a little. For only a second. A quick twist. It'll come right off. Snap!" *Andrew* said as he menacingly

walked closer to Duane. Even Stephanie was too scared to say anything at this point. "Just like a chicken leg."

"You're just joking, right?" Duane asked, still moving away from *Andrew* while trying not to break down in fear.

"Oh, it's no joke, Duane. I'm going to pull your head off." He answered with a twisted smile.

"Wait. M-m-maybe we could help you. You know? Find your old head." Duane suggested, hoping that he would be able to keep his head.

"Oh, it's no use. For years and years, I searched every room, every hallway, every closet." *Andrew* countered.

"Why my head?" Duane asked, close to collapsing in fear.

"Well, I would take hers, but it'll look kind of funny." He answered, causing Stephanie to take a few steps back in fear.

"My head's not that great either. I mean, it gets allergies. It's not that good at math. Its-its hair never does what you want it to." Duane said in one last attempt to keep his head.

"Nice try, Duane. But it's no use. I'm going to take your head. That's all there is to it. Just hold still." Andrew said, getting tired before walking towards Duane. But before he could take more than a single step, Duane moved out of the way towards the dumbwaiter.

"HEY, THE DUMBWAITER!" He shouted, running towards it and opening the door with Stephanie right behind him. However, as soon as they opened it, they froze in fear. For inside, the dumbwaiter was the head of another ghost.

"What were you expecting, a dish of ice cream?" The ghost asked, sounding annoyed.

"Your head. Now you don't have to take mine." Duane said, sounding relieved.

"Hey! Over here!" The ghost head said. Confused, Duane and Stephanie turned around and recoiled in shock at seeing a ghost body with no head. It then slowly made its way over to the dumbwaiter, where it cautiously picked up the ghost head. However, it seemed that the ghost body was not careful enough as it dropped the head a few seconds after picking it up.

"Ah! OH! Clumsy fool! It's a head, not a bowling bowl! Easy, easy." The ghost head chastised the body. It then slowly picked up the head, more carefully this time, and held it near its waist. "What are you looking at?"

"Who me?" Stephanie asked, confused.

"Don't play innocent with me, girlie girl, or you'll find out my bite is worse than my bark." The ghost head warned as the ghost body slowly moved closer to them. But, as it neared them, it fazed out of existence just as it reached the wall.

"Whoa." Duane said in complete shock.

"Wait a minute!" Stephanie said, realizing the flaw in *Andrew's* threat. "If you're not Andrew, then who are you?"

"I will tell you who he is." A familiar voice interjected, startling Duane and Stephanie. Looking to their right, they noticed that Otto had somehow gotten into the room without them noticing. "He is a no-good kid who works for me. Or at least, he used to. I have warned you about these pranks."

Real World

"Wait, if Seth isn't Andrew? Then who is he?" Ruby asked, confused.

"And why does Otto seem to know what's going on and isn't fazed by any of it?" Nora added.

"Don't worry. I'm getting to that." I answered before taking a sip of the milk Ruby brought for us. "All right. Otto then moves Seth to the side of the room..."

Story

"I shall deal with you later." Ottos told Seth, who was smiling, before turning back to Duane and Stephanie.

"How did you get inside? The door's locked?" Duane asked, shocked and still trying to process everything.

"There are many ways to get into a room in Hill House. But sometimes, there is no way to get out." Otto explained while showing them a key before unlocking and opening the door. "Would you please leave us, Duane? I would like to have a few words with Stephanie."

"Don't look so scared, Duane. What's he going to do, lecture me?" Stepanie joked when she noticed Duane's hesitant expression. Not wanting to stick around, Duane quickly exited the room with Stephanie closing the door. However, once she closed the door, she turned around and gasped in shock at what she was seeing. Otto was now translucent and wearing what appeared to be sea captain's clothing.

"Now, my cocky little friend." He said while mixing paints on the palette with a paintbrush.

"What are you doing, Otto?" Stephanie asked, afraid.

"That's Captain Otto to you." He scolded as paint filled the nearby canvas. It was at that moment the severity of the situation finally dawned on Stephanie. "WELCOME ABOARD!"

"Yes. Welcome aboard." A familiar voice said as Otto began painting on the canvas. Next to Otto appeared another ghost, but one that looked familiar. But once it became clear, Stephanie realized that it was Seth. "I hope you like the story I told you- about how I died."

"You-You're the ice cream boy?" Stephanie asked in disbelief.

"That's him, all right. And you think he ever gives me a bite? Never!" Andrew added as he and his body appeared next to Seth.

"I warned you, Stephanie. I WARNED YOU! To show some respect for Hill House!" Otto shouted before continuing to paint whatever he was making. Yet, each time Otto pressed the paintbrush on the canvas, a cold shiver went down Stephanie's spine with feeling worse by the second.

First Floor Stairs

Duane was nearing the landing of the stairs. As he made his way down from the attic, he contemplated whether or not he should wait for Stephanie or come home. But it was proving difficult as he was still recovering from the scares brought on by Seth and seeing Andrew's spirit. However, he could not help but feel that something wasn't quite right and stopped walking down the stairs. And not a moment too soon, for as soon as he stopped, he heard Stephanie scream from upstairs. Thinking that she was in trouble, he raced back up the stairs to the attic.

Hill House Attic

"I suppose when you become a permanent member of our little household, you'll learn." Otto said as he resumed painting the portrait of Stephanie. And with each stroke of the brush, more of Stepanie's body began to vanish. "You think she'll learn?"

"She'll learn." Seth agreed.

"She'll learn." Andrew also agreed while chuckling.

"Please. I didn't mean it." Stepanie begged, now only her head remained.

"Just another little dab around the mouth." Otto said, chuckling before painting some more.

"Duane. Help me." Stephanie begged, praying that he would hear her. Luckily, her prayers were answered as Duane returned not a moment too soon and became horrified at what he saw. But, he quickly got over it and made the connection between Stephanie and the painting. Looking for anything he could use, he spotted a bucket near his feet with some kind of liquid in it. Picking it up, he threw whatever it was, which turned out to be paint thinner, at the painting, which ruined it and caused Stephanie to return to normal.

"COME ON! ARE YOU OKAY?" Duane asked as he violently shook Stephanie.

"Yeah." She answered as she regained control of herself.

"AAAAHHHHH!" Otto screamed, startling them.

"RUN!" Duane said as he opened the door. They then exited the room and closed the door with Otto still screaming. Running down the stairs, they made it to the second floor and bolted down the hallway. All the while, Otto's spirit chased them throughout the house. Soon they were running down the stairs to the main floor and were out of the house a moment later. Yet, even then, they did not stop running until they were back at their house. But, despite the distance, Otto's rage-filled screams followed them home.

Twenty-Five Years Later

"It's just the fixer-upper we've been looking for." A lady said as she exited the car and walked up to Hill House. Behind her was her husband. In the twenty-five years since Duane and Stephanie's last *visit* , it has since been converted into a museum and shut down a

few years afterward. "We understand they used to give tours here. We heard the place was haunted."

"Haunted. Right. And I'm a ghost." Their guide said, laughing. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be very happy here."

Their guide then turned around and removed his hat, revealing that he was the same Otto that haunts Hill House and nearly killed Stephanie. He then smirked before placing his hat back on and closing the door. The doorknocker's eyes glowed green, and it let out a growl as the door closed.

Real World

"Very happy." Otto said in a chilling voice as he started to show the couple the house. I then closed the book. "The End."

"AWESOME!" Ruby and Nora shouted before letting out a massive yawn. Taking out my scroll, I saw that it was only a couple of minutes until midnight.

"Alright. It's time to go to bed." I told them as I got up from my bed and placed the book back in the case before closing it and putting it under my bed.

"Aw." They pouted.

"Can't you tell us" ***YAWN*** "Another?" Ruby asked, yawning midway and rubbing her eyes.

"Sorry, Ruby." I answered as I helped her up. "Plus, the others, specifically Yang, might be coming to look for you soon."

"Alright." She said, standing up with help from Zwei. "Good night."

"Good night, fearless leader. Thanks for the story." Nora said as she and Ruby exited the room, followed by Zwei.

"Good night." I said as I closed the door. Turning around, I sighed before heading to my bed and laying down, too tired and exhausted to change into my sleepwear. Yet, despite this, I could not help but smile at seeing Nora and Ruby's smiling faces as I told them the story of the headless ghost of Hill House. It reminded all the times I told stories to my younger sisters. Letting out a content sigh, I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep. Although, as sleep came to me, I wondered what will the next story Ruby and Nora would want to hear?

Note:

Something I made for my cousin as he's recently got into the Goosebumps shows and books.

Chapter 2

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Story Teller

Chap 2: The Girl Who Cried Monster

"Um..." I said, scared and trying my best not to lose consciousness. The reason why was because I was being held upside down. And as to why I was being held upside down was because of an angry Yang. As to why she was angry, well...

"Quiet." She growled out as she continued to hold me upside down by my leg. "So, Ruby. Why were you and Nora here with Jaune so late last night?"

You might be wondering what's happening. Well, it's simple. It was night time of the next day. Since it was Sunday and we had no classes for the rest of the week, thanks to Ozpin, the girls decided to have another sleepover. However, Yang was not too happy at the moment. The reason was that Ruby returned to the dorm way past midnight. And Yang being the overprotective sister, was upset at Ruby being up past her bedtime. Unfortunately, while trying to explain herself, Ruby accidentally said that she was with me in my dorm yesterday. Since Yang was already angry, she didn't listen to the entire explanation and immediately barged into my room while I was getting ready to sleep. And before I could say anything, she lifted me into the air by my leg.

"We were hearing listening to Jaune's stories." Ruby answered nervously.

"Don't lie to me, Ruby." Yang growled, clearly upset.

"She's not. We were listening to our fearless leader's stories. And before we knew it, it was nearing midnight." Nora chimed in, not affected by Yang's glare.

"Yeah. They were the best cheesy horror stories we had ever heard. And he keeps them in this spooky book." Ruby added, trying to calm Yang down.

"Really?" Yang asked, not believing them.

"Yes." Ruby and Nora answered. Even Zwei barked in agreement. However, had I not started to lose focus, I would have noticed that Zwei's eyes turned yellow for a brief second.

"Show me." Yang demanded. Nodding, Ruby and Nora went over to my bed, reached underneath, and pulled out the case that contained the book. Luckily, mainly because my vision was now extremely blurry, the case wasn't locked.

"SEE!" Ruby shouted after opening the case and showing Yang my book.

"Oh. I see. So, you three weren't... never mind." Yang sheepishly said with her eyes returning to their normal lilac color.

"What did you think we were doing?" Ruby asked, pouting.

"Um. Having too many sweets." Yang answered with a nervous chuckle. Although, it was easy to tell that it was a lie to cover what she was really thinking. And honestly, we couldn't blame her as not only was she protective of Ruby, but Ruby was also getting to be that age where her curiosity could get the better of her. Thankfully, Ruby was still naive and easily believed Yang's lie.

"Well, you don't need to worry about that, Yang. Jaune never lets me have more than a few pieces of candy." Ruby said with another adorable pout.

"Really?" Yang asked, surprised.

"Yup. I've even seen Jaune-Jaune take the candy Ruby was eating away when we saw an empty bag of strawberry bon bons." Nora

added.

"Really?" Yang asked while directing a glance towards a nervous Ruby. She then made a gesture to Ruby that said they'll discuss that later before turning to me. "Thanks for looking out for Ruby, Jaune. And sorry about the-oh."

While they were busy discussing what we were doing here last night, I had finally lost consciousness. Lucky, Nora came to the rescue. Although, in a way, I did not prefer.

"I GOT IT!" She shouted before using her semblance to give me one hell of a shock.

"OW!" I shouted as I regained consciousness. While everything was a bit fuzzy and blurry at first, my vision quickly cleared up when Nora gave me another, much milder shock. "Ow."

"Better, Jaune?" She asked as she helped me up.

"Yeah. Thanks, Nora." I answered with a smile. While the shock did hurt, I never took offense to it as it was simply Nora's unique way of helping others. Plus, I have been subject to far worse by my sisters when they pranked me during our younger years.

"Sorry about the confusion, Jaune." Yang said, getting my attention.

"It's fine, Yang. I have four younger sisters. I would have done the same." I told her while sitting down on my bed.

"How many sisters you have, Jaune?" Ruby asked, curious.

"I have seven sisters. Four younger, one old as me, and two older." I answered, causing them to become shocked.

"YOU HAVE SEVEN SISTERS! YOUR MOM MUST BE A SUPER MOM!" Nora shouted, surprised.

"How did she keep everyone under control?" Yang asked, curious.

"She kept us under control with one simple trick. And that trick my sisters and I dubbed the stare of death. Basically, when we saw that, we all went on our best behavior." I explained.

"I can see that. Well, anyway, we better get back to our dorm and get ready to sleep. Night-night." Ruby said as she hastily tried to exit the room. However, before she could even reach the door, Yang grabbed her by the wrist.

"Hold on, sis." She said while pulling Ruby next to her. "You and Nora said that Jaune has the best cheesy horror stories ever. I want to see if that is true as it's been a while since I heard a good story."

"YES! ANOTHER STORY!" Nora cheered as she sat down in front of me. Ruby escaped Yang's grip before sitting down next to Nora. Yang, meanwhile, grabbed a chair and brought it over to them before sitting. Seeing that I would not be able to escape, I sighed before picking up the book and opening it. Yet, even if I could, I wouldn't as seeing Ruby and Nora's smiling faces filled me with a joy that I only got when telling stories. Plus, despite the circumstances surrounding it, I now have Yang as part of the audience, which is nice.

"Alright. What kind of story do you all want to hear this time?" I asked, unable to contain my smile any longer as I skimmed through the book.

"Do you have any stories that have siblings?" Yang asked.

"Yes. Plenty. You're going to need to be more specific." I answered.

"Oh, how about one with monsters?" Nora suggested.

"That reminds me of one story I read a long time ago. Do you of the story called The Boy Who Cried Wolf? Do you have something similar?" Yang asked.

"Yes, one that is very similar to that story. It's called The Girl Who Cried Monster. It's about a girl named Lucy who loves to tell monster

stories. She's told so many that her friends and family are sick of it. Then one day, Lucy discovers a real, live monster: the librarian in charge of the summer reading program. Too bad Lucy's told so many monster tall tales. Too bad no one believes a word she says. Too bad the monster knows who she is and is coming after her next. How does that sound?" I asked.

"Sounds like we need snacks. Be right back." Yang said before getting up and exiting the dorm. Surprised, we stayed silent for a few moments. But before I could break the silence, Yang came back with a couple of bags of chips and some sodas. Although, three cans were diet soda with no caffeine added for Nora. Good thing as the last thing we need now is a sugar-crazed, hyper Nora. "Okay, shall we begin?"

"YES!" Nora and Ruby shouted. Chuckling, I flipped to the correct page.

"Okay. We begin with Lucy. She was an average teenage girl that's part of an average family. Or so she thought. Anyway, one thing Lucy loved to do was tell scary monster stories to her brother..."

Story

We see some beautiful summer trees slowly passing with the sun shining brightly above. However, the angle of the branches and the light fog gave an almost eerie feeling to them. Soon, a spider making a web is seen, unaware of anything happening around it.

'I love to scare my little brother Randy. I tell him scary stories about monsters until he just begs me to stop.'

Soon we see what seems to be an ordinary house with a giant front yard. There are leaves scattered about that indicate that summer is ending, with fall about to take its place. A bike is soon seen on its side near a garden arch.

'And I'm always teasing him by pretending to see the monsters everywhere.'

A ball is soon seen bouncing towards some trees with plants at the base as a young boy chasing after it. However, once he reached the tree, he stopped in his tracks. Looking over the plants, he removed his slippers and used his foot to touch the plants. The ball was completely forgotten at this point.

'I guess that's why no one believed me the day I saw a real monster... until it was too late.'

"RANDY!" A voice shouted behind the boy, startling him. He quickly turned around and saw his older sister walking towards him with a worried expression. However, if you were to look closely, you could tell she was trying her best not to break down in laughter. "Haven't you ever heard of the razor-tooth toe biter?"

"What do you mean, toe biter?" Randy asked, scared.

"It got Becky and Lilah next door." The girl said with a smug grin. Yet, anyone could tell that she was having fun scaring her brother, especially when he looked down at his toes. "While they were playing in their wading pool."

"Couldn't they see it coming?"

"Toe biter can camouflage itself as anything. Even water."

"YOU'RE LYING!" Randy shouted, scared.

"Ask Becky to take off her shoe. She'll show you. Ask her." The sister challenged. She then took off her shoes before going over to the plants and began touching them with her feet.

"DON'T USE YOUR FOOT!" Randy shouted, now worried for his sister's feet.

"Do it real quick." The sister said while continuing to touch the plants with her feet. And after making sure her brother was watching, she began to fake scream. "GET IT AWAY! MY TOE! MY TOE! MY TOE!"

"AAHHH!" Randy screamed before running back inside the house.

Real World

"Wow. Talk about a mean sister." Yang said, annoyed.

"Huh?" I asked, looking up while placing my finger on the line.

"Yeah. I'm glad Yang was never like that." Ruby added.

"Were any of your sisters like that, Jaune?" Nora asked, curious.

"None like that. My older sisters liked to tease me from time to time. And they would also occasionally prank me. But none of it was ever mean-spirited." I answered.

"That's good. While I do like teasing Ruby, I would never go so far as to scare her just to get a laugh." Yang said as she opened a bag of chips.

"Anyway, let's continue. After getting scared by the *toe biter,* Randy ran back to the house in hopes of getting help for his sister."

Story

"Mom, the toe biter got Lucy." Randy told his mother, who was in the middle of cleaning.

"Oh, Randy, calm down. You know there's no such thing as a toe biter." The mother said as she walked towards the microwave.

"Yes, there is! All her toes are gone." Randy said, trying to convince her mother that there was a toe biter. Hearing footsteps behind him, Randy turned around and saw his sister enter the house with a victorious grin on her face.

"Lucy, would you please stop scaring your little brother?" The mother chastised.

"Oh, mom. It was just a joke." Lucy said, still smiling at scaring her brother.

"How did all of your toes grow back?" Randy asked, shocked.

"Haven't I asked you not to tell him monster stories?" The mother asked in an exasperated tone as she took out some eggs from the fridge.

"Actually, the toe biter gave me back my toes, 'cause I promised to cut yours off and give them to him tonight." Lucy explained with a smile that grew wider each second as she leaned closer to him.

"NO!"

"Lucy." The mother warned.

"What's the point of having a little brother if you can't torture him?" Lucy asked while smiling a devious smile towards her brother.

"Lucy, don't you have reading rangers at the library?" The mother asked, trying to get her daughter out of the house and stop her from scaring her younger brother. "Why don't you go and bother Mr. Mortman for a while?"

Library

Lucy places a book called *Black Beauty* on the counter and slides it towards the librarian. The librarian continues signing the back of a book before looking towards Lucy.

"Well, what do you think?" He asks.

"Two thumbs down." Lucy answered while giving a two-thumbs-down gesture.

"But, Lucy, *Black Beauty* is a classic." The librarian said, shocked as he picked up the book and examined it.

"It would have been better if the horse had two heads." Lucy explained, causing the librarian to huff in annoyance. "And big, old, gnarly fangs."

"Why don't you go pick another book?" The librarian suggested, tired.

Lucy shrugged before heading to her favorite section of the library, the horror section. But as she left, the librarian shook his head before continuing to sign the return books. Back over to Lucy, we see her going through some books on a cart before stopping on one. And as she looked over the book, a young boy, roughly around Lucy's age, sees her and walks over to her with a book in his hand.

"Hey, Lucy, what are you getting?" He asked.

"Frankenstein."

"Cool." He said as they walked back to the librarian to check out their books. Getting there, the librarian looked up from his work and internally sighed as the duo approached him. Lucy then gave him the book she picked out.

"Are you sure, Lucy? Frankenstein is a classic as well." He asked, exasperated.

"But this one's got a monster." She explained with a smirk. Sighing, the librarian started the process of recording the book and who was taking it out.

"Wouldn't it be cool if there were real monsters?" The boy asked, smiling.

"I'm not so sure, Aaron. Most people like to be frightened in movies or stories." The librarian answered before startling the duo by

stamping the book. He then closed the book before handing it to Lucy. "Not in real life."

However, Lucy hesitated in taking the book as both she and Aaron were almost frozen in uncertainty. The librarian's answer seemed ominous and almost like a threat or grave warning. Even the air around them seemed to grow tenser with each passing second. Even the sounds of footsteps and people whispering to each other went silent. Raising her eyebrows, Lucy grabbed the book before leaving the library, with Aaron following behind her.

Real World

"Wow, Lucy really likes monster stories." Yang commented.

"She was always a fan of monster stories. Although, even she doesn't know why she likes them." I explained after taking a sip of the soda Yang gave me.

"What was the librarian's name again, Jaune?" Nora asked.

"Mr. Mortman." I answered while opening a bag of chips.

"I don't trust him. Something seems off about him." Ruby said with Zwei barking in agreement.

"Okay. After taking the book, the duo made a hasty exit from the library and headed towards Lucy's home."

Story

"Aaron, you ever notice anything weird about Mr. Mortman?" Lucy asked as they continued making their way home. "Like his creepy, beady little eyes."

"And his sweaty little hands."

"When he gave me my book, it was so slimy I almost dropped it."

"Yeah? Echh!"

"Oh, my blades. I forgot them at the library." Lucy said, annoyed, turning to Aaron.

"Ah, man, I gotta get home."

"Oh, no big deal. I'll see you later." Lucy as Aaron continued the sidewalk before turning around and heading back to the library.

Five Minutes Later

Reaching the library, Lucy looked around for a bit before heading towards the entrance. The sun setting caused the library to have an eerie feel surrounding it. Almost making the building an imposing, towering figure over her. The plants and mossing growing on it made the building seem ancient and mysterious. Now able to see the door, Lucy was surprised when the lights went out. Swallowing hard, Lucy started to go up the steps. The creaking of each step seemed to be more intense than usual. And as she reached the halfway point, Lucy jumped in fright when a black cat suddenly touched her legs.

Breathing in and out, Lucy finished walking up the stairs and opened the door. Thankfully, despite the lights being turned off, there was enough remaining sunlight that she could see easily. However, as she began walking towards where she left her blades, Lucy started to hear someone humming. Yet, Lucy thought nothing of it as it was most likely Mr. Mortman humming while organizing some books. Soon, she found her blades and picked them up before heading back towards the exit.

"Probably a classic." Lucy said with a smile. However, she stopped dead in her tracks by what she heard Mr. Mortman say next.

"It's time, my plump, little beauties. My, my, my, little friends."

Letting her curiosity get the better of her, Lucy started following Mr. Mortman's voice to find out what he was doing.

"I do believe we put on a little weight."

Doing her best not to make a sound, Lucy moved to stand behind a book aisle where she could remain hidden yet still have a clear view of Mr. Mortman. Straining her eyes, Lucy saw Mr. Mortman sitting at one of the tables in the center of the reading area. And to her surprise, she noticed Mr. Mortman making baby talk to a couple of turtles that he has as pets.

"Coochie, coochie, coochie, coochie. Don't be shy." Lucy heard Mr. Mortman say as he grabbed a container and placed it in the turtles' tank before opening it and letting the flies out. "It's dinner time, my little friends."

Typically, this would be seen as a man caring deeply for his pets. However, something inside Lucy told her that something was deeply off. And that alone was enough to make her stay and continue to watch. But on the other hand, even if she didn't find anything strange, she would at least get to see if Mr. Mortman was weird or not.

"Oh, aren't you hungry? Munch, munch." Mr. Mortman said as he watched his turtles eat their dinner.

But what shocked Lucy to her core was what Mr. Mortman did next.

"Some crunchy flies, my little friends." He said while opening up another container and grabbing a fistful of flies.

And to Lucy's shock and horror, Mr. Mortman began messily eating the flies. And judging by the sounds he was making, Mr. Mortman clearly enjoyed the bugs he was eating. Lucy showed visible unease at what she was seeing while trying not to make any sounds of disgust that could get Mr. Mortan's attention. However, that became far more challenging when she witnessed Mr. Mortman changing into a grotesque monster. His head became swollen; his eyes bulged out of his head, with the pupils changing color to pitch black. His teeth changed from dull to razor-sharp. Once done transforming, Mr.

Mortman chuckled in a petrifying way before opening another container to eat more flies.

Lucy, now completely scared, tried desperately to remain silent and not give away her position as she watched Mr. Mortman devour the flies. Seeing that one fly escaped and was now on the table, Mr. Mortman caught it with ease before bringing it to his mouth and eating it. Relishing in the taste, Mr. Mortman began to cackle. Not able to watch any more for fear of throwing up and getting caught, Lucy quickly got up and bolted for the door. Had she not been so scared, she would have noticed that it was now dark outside. Yet, despite running as fast as she could, she could not escape the sounds of the monster Mr. Mortman laughing. And even falling hard on the ground, Lucy did not waste a second in getting up and running the rest of the way home.

Real World

"So, Mr. Mortman is the monster?" Yang asked, getting my attention.

"Yup." I answered.

"Have to say; I didn't see that coming." Yang said as she took a sip of her soda. "Thought it was going to be her friend or parents."

"Yeah. I thought so, too." Ruby added, with Zwei nodding his head.

"How long has Mr. Mortman lived there?" Nora asked.

"Roughly ten years, I would say." I answered.

"Wow, how has anyone not noticed before?" Yang asked, surprised.

"There's a reason for that. Besides, Mr. Mortman took great care in making sure he wasn't discovered." I explained before resuming. "After discovering that Mr. Mortman was a monster, Lucy ran all the way home, never stopping for anything."

Story

"MOM! DAD! A MONSTER!" Lucy shouted as she rushed into the kitchen, where her parents were busy preparing dinner.

"HUH!? WHERE!?" Randy, who was sitting at the table, asked, frightened.

"AT THE LIBRARY!" Lucy answered, panting.

"Don't you say hi, anymore?" The father asked as he continued making meatballs. It was clear that he was both tired and used to Lucy's tales that he now just goes along with whatever she says.

"HI, DAD! THERE'S A MONSTER AT THE LIBRARY!"

"Lucy, please." The mother said, annoyed.

"What kind of monster?" Randy asked.

"Could you give us a hand here, please?" The father asked, getting Lucy's attention.

"A BIG, SLIMY, DISGUSTING ONE THAT EATS BUGS!" Lucy shouted, barely able to keep herself together at this point.

"Oh, I'd hope this monster thing was just a phase you were going through." The father said, sounding tired.

"Life is a phase I'm going through." Lucy rebutted, getting impatient.

"Well, could you go through it, please, after you washed your hands and set the table?" The father said, done with the monster stories.

"DAD! THIS IS NO JOKE!"

"Larry, you're making them too big." The mother said, cutting in.

"I happen to like big meatballs." He explained while grabbing a towel to clean his hands.

"DOESN'T ANYONE HERE BELIEVE ME!?" Lucy asked, shocked. Seeing that her parents didn't hear or were ignoring her, Lucy ran back to her room. But before she did so, she grabbed the family's house phone before entering her room and locking the door. Sitting down at her desk, she called the only other person she could trust. And after a few moments of waiting for him to pick up and exchanging greetings, Lucy began to explain what she saw at the library.

"His eyes popped out of his head! And he was eating bugs! And everyone here thinks I'm making it up." Lucy said to her friend Aaron.

"Hey, I wonder why."

"What? You don't believe me either?" Lucy asked, shocked.

"Calm down, Lucy. You're totally obsessed." Aaron explained with most of his attention on the game he was playing.

"Ooh, big word. Well, you'll believe me soon enough. I'll prove it to you." Lucy declared while picking up her camera.

Next Day

Library

"Don't you think the monster was the most sympathetic character in this story?" Mr. Mortman asked Lucy.

"Do you believe in monsters?" She asked, never taking her eyes off him. Sighing, Mr. Mortman took off his glasses before answering.

"Perhaps we all have a little monster in us, Lucy." He said with a tense silence following afterward. "Why don't you go pick another book while I tidy up?"

"Okay."

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, right. See ya."

With that said, Mr. Mortman began organizing the books while Lucy stood up from her seat. Grabbing her bag and swinging it over her shoulder, Lucy began to walk away. However, she did stop and stare at the book Mr. Mortman was organizing for a moment before finally leaving. Yet, she cast one final look at Mr. Mortman before heading to the door. But as Lucy reached the door, she made sure no one else saw her before opening and closing the door without actually leaving.

Knowing that Mr. Mortman was in the same place last time, Lucy moved to stand behind the same book aisle as yesterday. But as she made her way there, she tensed up when the lights suddenly went out. But a second later, she heard Mr. Mortman humming and knew she was running out of time to get her evidence and get out. Steeling herself, she finished making her way to the book aisle and peered around to see Mr. Mortman with his pet turtles.

"It's dinner time, my little friends. Don't forget to chew." He said as he poured some flies into the turtle tank.

As the turtles started to eat, Mr. Mortman started rapidly clicking his tongue. But he stopped when he noticed a fly land on his hand. Yet, the fly quickly met its demise when Mr. Mortman ate it. Lucy recoiled in disgust and nearly froze when Mr. Mortman began changing into his monster form. Seeing that now was her chance, Lucy kneeled and searched her bag for her camera. Finding it, she stood back up and turned it on.

"My favorite." He said as he held a few flies in his hand.

Seeing that he was distracted, Lucy began crawling on the floor to the tables to get a better shot. Although, she did have to resist the urge to gag and possibly throw up when she saw Mr. Mortman licking his lips. She even had to close her eyes when he slurped down the flies.

"MMM." He said while smacking his lips at the supposed good-tasting flies. Steeling herself, Lucy rose to a kneeling position behind a cart and snapped the photo of Mr. Mortman while he was licking his fingers.

Unfortunately, she forgot her camera had a flash and shutter sound.

"Who's there?" Mr. Mortman demanded when he saw the flash.

"Stupid." Lucy whispered while smacking her forehead. Hearing Mr. Mortman chuckling, Lucy knew she had to leave now or risk getting captured and possibly eaten.

"Lucy." She heard Mr. Mortman call out as she ran down the dark pathways of the library towards the exit. "Keep running, little one. I love fast food."

Not bothering to listen, Lucy ran as fast as possible to the exit. Unfortunately, because it was dark with only the sunsetting to show her what was directly in front of her, Lucy quickly became lost. And had she feared for her life, she would have realized that she had left her bag behind.

"Oh, my mouth is watering."

Trying to find the way out, Lucy took a turn that she thought would lead her to the exit. Unfortunately, she only came to a dead end.

"Lucy. I know you're in there. AH-AAH." Mr. Mortman called out before trying to grab her, only to miss and grab the book shelf instead. This caused Lucy to scream and drop her camera while backing up and falling to the ground. As she backed up, Mr. Mortman chuckled, and he walked around the corner to face her.

"You're just making me hungrier." He said in a low voice after shaking his head. "Dinner is served."

Real World

"Wow. Talk about being in a tight spot." Yang commented as she finished her drink and opened another one.

"What kind of monster is Mr. Mortman?" Ruby asked.

"That will be answered later in the story." I answered. "Panting hard, Lucy tried to keep her composure while trying to find a way to escape Mr. Mortman. That was when she noticed her camera nearby."

Story

Seeing that Mr. Mortman was messing with her and lost in the moment, Lucy dove for her camera and crawled through his legs.

"Come back. Come back. Oh, come back." Mr. Mortman begged as he tried to grab her but failed. But Lucy didn't listen as she found her second wind and ran as fast as possible towards where she thought the exit was. Yet, as she ran, Mt. Mortman's chuckles echoed around her.

"You can't get away from me, you little cricket."

Panting, Lucy finally saw the exited and willed her legs to go faster. Pushing the door open, Lucy ran down the stairs, not bothering to close the door. Yet, despite running, she could still hear Mr. Mortman's grunting closing in on her.

"LUCY! WHY DON'T YOU STOP? LUCY! COME BACK! COME BACK! COME BACK!"

Yet, she never stopped running, not even to catch her breath. After about ten minutes of nonstop running, she finally reached her home. Opening and closing the front door, Lucy finally allowed herself to catch her breath. Once she calmed down enough, Lucy grabbed the home phone, ran to her room, locked the door, and called Aaron, who was quick to answer.

"If Mortman's such a terrible monster, how'd you get away?"

"I think the flash blinded him. But I got the picture. I got my proof."

"You're forgetting something, Lucy. Your library card has your address on it. Mortman knows where you live."

"So, what?"

"He could be on his way to your house this minute."

"That's not funny, Aaron."

"If I were you, I'd get out of there right now."

Tired and slightly annoyed, Lucy hung up before placing the phone on her desk. Getting up from her desk, she went downstairs and was about to exit the house with the intent of heading to the shop to get the photos developed. However, as soon as she opened the door, Lucy gasped when she saw Mr. Mortman standing on the other side.

"Good evening, Lucy. May I come in for a minute?" He asked with a smile that she could tell was fake.

"No." She quickly answered before sliding the lock on the screen door. "My parents aren't home right now. I mean, they'll be home any minute. I mean, they are in the bathroom. MOM! Is dad still cleaning his rifle?"

"It's okay, Lucy. It's really you that I've come to see." Mr. Mortman explained while lifting his hand to reveal that he had her backpack. "You left your backpack at the library. I have it right here. This is yours, isn't it?"

"Could you maybe just leave it on the doorstep? Please?"

"Um, wouldn't it be easier if you opened the door and let me and it to you?" Mr. Mortman asked, with Lucy shaking her head. "I'll just set it down here."

"Thank you."

"Oh, it's no trouble. It's on my way."

Seeing that he wouldn't be able to get in, he smiled before adjusting his glasses and turned to leave. But Lucy, almost paralyzed in fear, waited in her spot until she could no longer see Mr. Mortman. However, as soon as he was about to step off the property, he turned around and addressed Lucy one last time.

"I look forward to our next little chat." With that said, Mr. Mortman turned and left, with Lucy closing the door right after.

Ten Minutes Later

Hearing the sounds of a car pulling up into the driveway, Lucy dashed out of the house to see her parents getting out of their car.

"DAD! MOM! MR. MORTMAN WAS HERE!" Lucy shouted as she ran up to them with her camera in hand. "We gotta get this film developed right away. I took a picture that proves he's a monster."

"Calm down, Lucy." Her mother told her.

"He followed me home today."

"He followed you home for no reason?" Her father asked, skeptical.

"Well, I forgot my knapsack at the library, and he brought it over, but-" Lucy began, but her mother cut in.

"Well, that was very nice of him. He lives all the way across town. It wasn't on his way at all."

"Come on. We're wasting time. The photo place is going to close."

"Now, Lucy." Her father said, annoyed.

"PLEASE!" Lucy begged. Huffing, the parents looked towards each other before relenting.

Two hours later

"LET ME SEE! LET ME SEE!" Randy whined as he followed his sister out of the shop.

"I knew it." Lucy said as she looked through the photos. Only to become annoyed when Randy took them out of her hand and threw them to the floor. "Nice work."

"Randy, get in the car, please." The father shouted.

"You heard your father." The mother added. Sighing, Lucy kneeled and began to collect the photos. However, she froze when a familiar hand came into view. Looking up, she saw Mr. Mortman gazing at her.

"You're quite the photographer." He said while continuing to gather the photos.

"Mr. Mortman, what are you doing here?" Lucy asked, scared.

"Have you been thinking about monsters again?"

"Mr. Mortman, thanks very much for bringing home Lucy's backpack today." Lucy's father shouted from the car.

"Oh, it was nothing. Uh, it was on my way." Mr. Mortman nervously said, trying to compose himself.

"Ah."

"Mr. Mortman, why don't you come over for dinner tomorrow night?" Lucy's mother offered, shocked her daughter.

"Lucy's been talking a great deal about you. It'd be nice to get to know you better." Lucy's father added.

"Well, that would be lovely. Thank you." Mr. Mortman answered smiling before turning to Lucy. "It's been so long since I had a home-cooked meal."

Scared, Lucy quickly gathered the remaining photos before getting into the car and heading home.

The Next Day

Dinner Time

It was dinner time in the household. Everyone was making preparations for the evening to make their coming guest comfortable. The food was almost done; the lights were dimmed as soft classical music played in the background. However, the only one not relaxed was Lucy, as she was struggling to get her parents to believe her.

"Don't you see that he's a monster?" She asked, tired after placing the photograph on the counter. While it displayed the library when she took the photo, Mr. Mortman was strangely absent from the picture. "The fact that he's not in this picture proves it."

"I don't care if he's a drooling werewolf. He's coming for dinner." The mother told her. At that moment, before Lucy could continue, they heard the doorbell ring. Both Randy and Lucy gasped as they knew who it meant. The mother then gave Lucy a plate filled with food. "Remember. Your best behavior."

Sighing, Lucy looked towards her brother as her parents left the kitchen to answer the door. After a couple of minutes, they heard both their parents and Mr. Mortman heading to the living room. Turning around, they entered the living room and saw Mr. Mortman shaking hands with their mother.

"This is very kind of you." He said, smiling.

"Oh, it's nothing. Our pleasure, really." The mother said, smiling. Nervous, Lucy and her brother walked to stand behind the mother so

they could keep Mr. Mortman in their sights.

"Good evening, Lucy. Nice to see you again, young Randy. Will you be joining us for reading rangers next year?" Mr. Mortman asked.

"Can I sleep on it?" Rangy asked while hiding behind Lucy. This caused all the adults to chuckle at his answer.

"Of course." Mr. Mortman answered before moving to the other side of the room. "My, what a- a lovely house."

"Lucy? Offer Mr. Mortman a meatball." The mother reminded. Scared, she looked towards her mother, asking if she could choose not to. But, knowing she had to, Lucy nervously walked up to Mr. Mortman and showed him the plate full of meatballs. And as soon as he grabbed one, she immediately stepped back to stand next to her brother.

"Mmm. Delicious." Mr. Mortman said after swallowing. He then grabbed a toothpick and cleaned his teeth. "What's for dinner?"

"Well, it was going to be a surprise, but-" The mother began before turning to her husband.

"Since you asked, you are." He finished, surprising everyone else and causing Mr. Mortman to nearly choke on the meatball.

"Excuse me. I thought you said-"

"That's right. You. You are." The mother said, showing that her mouth changed to reveal monster teeth and fangs.

Upon seeing this, both Mr. Mortman and the kids gasped and froze in fear. Turning to the father, they saw that he had also had teeth similar to the mother. They began hissing as they slowly approached Mr. Mortman, almost as if they were stalking prey. Mr. Mortman, scared for his life, tried to back away but fell to the ground. He raised his hands in an attempt to try and convince them to stop, but it

proved fruitless. Lucy and her brother, meanwhile, sat on the nearby couch and continued to watch in pure shock and fear. The light offered by the single candle illuminated their faces and made the moment all the more horrifying.

"Now that was a close call." The father said as they returned to normal after they finished eating Mr. Mortman. The mother then used a napkin to clean her husband's mouth as there was some blood still left over. "Now listen, both of you. You can never, ever let anyone know that we are monsters."

"We know that." Lucy said, her shock now gone and replaced with excitement.

"And we can't have any other monsters in town either." The mother added with a hiss at the end.

"And do you know why?" The father asked.

"Because they might tell other people about us." Lucy answered as if it were obvious.

"And they'd be frightened, and they'd chase us away." Randy added.

"Or worse." The father added as he grabbed a breath freshener and sprayed it into his wife's mouth. "Mr. Mortman was the first monster to come around in twenty years."

"Besides us, of course." Lucy commented.

"That's why it took us so long to believe you, Lucy." The mother explained.

"And when you two get bigger, you're gonna get your training fangs." The father said as he sat down and grabbed the newspaper.

"That's right. And before long, you and Randy will be able to transform, just like your father and me." The mother added, smiling

when she saw her kids becoming excited. However, the moment soon passed when they heard clattering right outside their window.

"Oh, no. Another one." Randy said, spotting a face outside the window.

"Not another mortman." The mother said, worried.

"What are we going to do?" Lucy asked, scared. The mother looked towards the father with a questioning glance.

"Better let him in." He answered with a slow nod. He then put away the newspaper before him, and his wife got their fangs ready. They let out a warning hiss, hoping to scare the monster away. But they both had to cover their mouths quickly and looked away when the monster pulled its head off to reveal that it was only Aaron wearing a mask.

"Hey. What's up?" He asked, unaware of what was happening.

"Just finished dinner." The father answered, smiling.

"Aw, man. Talk about timing. Well, what's for dessert?" He asked.

"Well, it was going to be a surprise, but..." The mother began, causing her kids to panic. "Since you asked."

"You... like cherry pie?" The father finished asking while holding up a freshly made cherry pie.

"Sure." Aaron answered, unaware of the breath of relief Lucy and Randy took. Although, he did become confused when everyone started laughing.

"Pardon me." The mother said after involuntarily letting out a burp.

Real World

"...And then, everyone laughed some more before letting Aaron so they could eat the pie together. The End." I said while closing the book.

"Looks like Ruby and Nora were right. You do have some good stories, vomit boy." Yang said as she and Nora started collecting the garbage.

"Thanks." I said, smiling as I put the book away in its case and placed it underneath my bed.

"How many stories do you have, Jaune?" Nora asked.

"Plenty of stories, Nora." I answered.

"Well, in that case, since we have off for the rest of the week, we'll definitely be back tomorrow for another." Yang said with a smirk.

"YES! MORE-" Ruby began, but Yang cut her off.

"Don't think I forgot about you, Rubes. We still need to talk about... and she's gone." Yang began but stopped when Ruby used her semblance to escape the room with Zwei. "Anyway, good night, Jaune."

"Night, fearless leader. Oh, I should come up with a new nickname." Nora began but stopped when Yang pulled her out the door before she could start listing different names. Chuckling, I got up and stretched before taking out my scroll to check the time.

"I should probably take a shower and head to sleep." I said before grabbing my pajamas and entering the bathroom. But before entering, I cast a quick look at the calendar and saw that fall break would be coming up soon. *'I should probably head back home soon. It would be nice to see Lucy and Randy again. I wonder how their training is coming along.'*

Note:

The Next Chapter will be The House of No Return.

In the episode, Mr. Mortman is seen eating crickets and has spiders for pets. In the book, he has turtles for pets and eats flies. Since it wouldn't change much, I changed it to how the book has it.

Chapter 3

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Story Teller

Chap 3: The House of No Return

'That was a nice meal.' I thought as I finished my lunch and took a sip of my soda.

Currently, I am in Vale trying out a new corner burger shop that recently opened. It was Monday, and the weather was cool but warm. So, naturally, since there were no classes today, I decided to head into Vale and enjoy the day. Typically, I would have gone with one of my friends or teammates unless I needed some alone time. However, Pyrrha and Ren were still away and won't be back for a while. Nora was with Team Rwby, Coco, and Velvet back at Beacon in detention. For what reason, I don't know. All I do know is that Ms. Goodwitch was at Team Rwby's dorm furious and yelling. However, despite everyone being busy, I wasn't alone.

"How are the bones, Zwei?" I asked, smiling as he gnawed on the bones I gave him. He gave a bark before returning to his food.

Before I left for Vale, Ruby asked if I could watch over Zwei while she was in detention. And before I could answer, she raced off to the detention room, leaving me with Zwei. Looking towards him, he happily barked before running circles around me. Chuckling, I let him follow me to the bullheads and Vale. Figuring he must have been hungry, I asked for some chicken legs to give to Zwei.

'Still not sure he's a normal dog.' I thought as I took out my storybook.

Perhaps it was just the blood rushing to my head when Yang had me upside down, but I could have sworn Zwei's eyes changed color for a brief moment. Knowing it would be useless to try and prove or think

about it any longer, I let out a sigh before opening the book to the last page. Taking out a pen, I started to write down the next *story.* We stayed like this for what felt like the next hour. Zwei was gnawing on the chicken bones while I continued writing out as much of the next story as possible. Feeling that I had written enough, I closed the book with the pen in it before letting out a content sigh. Looking back at Zwei, I smiled when I noticed that he had curled up into a ball before falling asleep. Chuckling, I leaned back into my seat and stretched before reaching for my soda.

"HEY, JAUNE!" Nora shouted, startling me right before I grabbed my drink. Yet, Zwei merely let out a yawn before stretching.

"Nora, you scared me." I said, trying to calm my beating breath. Once I calmed down enough, I noticed that Nora wasn't alone. Next to her were Ruby, Yang, Blake, and Velvet. "Hey, how was detention."

"Boring." They answered as they sat down across from me. Spotting Ruby, Zwei barked before jumping from his seat and into her arms.

"ZWEI!" Ruby cheered as she hugged him.

"Where's Weiss and Coco?" I asked, curious.

"Weiss is with her sister." Blake answered.

"And Coco is heading to the other side of Vale for some specials she recently saw." Velvet answered. She then noticed that I still had the book out. "What's the book?"

"Oh, it-" I began, but Ruby and Nora cut me off.

"IT CONTAINS THE BEST CHEESY HORROR STORIES WE'VE EVER HEARD!" They shouted, startling Velvet and me. Blake grunted in annoyance while Yang chuckled.

"What kind of stories?" Blake asked, semi-curious but more annoyed and tired.

"The cheesy horror kind. You know, the ones that are bad at scaring you and are just plain cheesy but are so good that you can't help but finish the story or movie." Yang answered.

"How many stories you have, Jaune?" Velvet asked, curious.

"Oh, he has many stories. And some that you won't ever believe." A new voice answered. Looking behind us, we saw a girl with straight black hair and wearing a jean jacket that was roughly around our age walking towards us.

"Oh, hey." I said, smiling when I realized it was a friendly face. But I became curious when I didn't see her brother. "Where's your brother?"

"Randy's back home. He's in pain since his special features are growing." She answered.

"Yeah, that's understandable." I said with a wince. Considering what the *special features* are, they must be pretty painful.

"What special features?" Blake asked, curious. "Faunus features?"

"Nope." Lucy answered. "Something really special that you probably wouldn't believe if I told you."

"You know, your brother's name seems familiar. But I can't place my finger on it." Yang said, looking Lucy up and down.

"Well, considering Jaune has his special book out. You probably heard my name in one of the stories." She explained.

"Lucy? Randy's sister?" Nora asked.

"That's me. Jaune uses the names of people he knows from back in Arc Town." Lucy explained/lied.

"Did you two grow up together?" Velvet asked with a light glare.

"You could say so. I mostly hung out with my brother, my friend Aaron, and Jaune's two youngest sisters. He did, however, babysit my brother a few times." She answered.

"So, you used their names in your Girl Who Cried Monster story?" Yang asked, curious.

"Yes." I answered before turning to Lucy. "What brings you to Vale?"

"Oh, mom sent me here to pick up a few things and meet up with some *special* folks who can help me with something I'm struggling with." She answered before looking at her watch. "Well, I have to go now. See you, Jaune. Oh, and by the way. Practically all of Arc Town wants to see you soon."

"Don't worry. I'll visit soon. Tell everyone I said hi." I told her.

"I will." She said before running off. But not before flashing me a smile. However, she made sure to do so while the others were distracted so she could show me her monster fangs. Chuckling, I turned back to the others.

"She seems nice." Velvet said, glaring at Lucy's retreating form.

"Did you actually base that story around her or only used the names?" Nora asked, curious.

"More or less." I lied, not wanting to tell them the truth. At least, not yet.

"Well, since we are all here now and don't have anything else planned for today, how about another story, Jaune?" Yang asked. But before I could answer, Blake cut in.

"You know, it's been a while since I heard a good story apart from the Ninjas of Love series. Plus, a good cheesy horror story sounds nice right now." She said, turning to me.

"What about you, Velvet?" Nora asked.

"Well, I don't like horror stuff as I get scared very easily. But I do enjoy watching those horror movie parodies or the cheesy ones where it's more for laughs and entertainment rather than trying to scare someone." She answered.

"Alright." I said with a sigh as I grabbed the book.

"YES!" Ruby and Nora cheered.

"And since Velvet and Blake are new, how they choose what kind of story I tell." I suggested.

"Fine by me." Yang agreed with Ruby and Nora nodding while Zwei barked. Velvet and Blake looked towards each other before shrugging.

"Do you have a haunted house story?" Blake asked.

"Yes." I answered as I flipped through the book. "How does this sound? Robbie, Lori, and Nathan are part of a club called *The Danger Club* , of which they are the only members and pride themselves on being the boldest children they know, who will take any dare they are offered. They become interested in Chris Wakely, a new boy in town, and encourage him to join them after he passes the initiation, which is to spend an hour alone in The House of No Return."

"Sounds interesting and original. Sure." Blake answered.

"It does sound interesting. But can we go someplace else to hear it?" Velvet asked.

"Sure." We answered.

Getting up, I paid for my meal before we left the burger shop while discussing where we should go. After a couple of minutes, we decided to head to the park as it had more seats with better shade.

But as we neared the park, we felt the winds increase in strength, with the temperature dropping by a few degrees. Yet, we ignored it as it was still relatively warm. However, as we were about to reach the park, the sky suddenly turned dark. Looking up, we noticed that the sky changed from clear to filled with thunderclouds in only a few moments. Knowing that rain was coming, we decided to head back to the airstrip and get on a bullhead to return to Beacon. Unfortunately, we felt our scrolls vibrate as soon we started heading there. Taking them out, we realized that a weather warning had been issued for the impending storm. Feeling some rain already pouring, we began to run towards the nearest shelter we could find as we wouldn't be able to make it to the airstrip in time. Luckily, we quickly found refuge.

"Of all the places we could pick, we had to pick an abandoned house." Yang complained as we shook ourselves dry while Nora and I barricaded the door with a dresser.

"At least we dry and safe now." Ruby said before covering herself with her arms when Zwei shook himself dry. "For the most part."

"True." Yang said, annoyed as she moved to sit on a nearby box. Only to hit her toes against something and let out a small curse. "Dammit. Can we get some light or something?"

"I think we should conserve as much of our scroll's battery as possible." Velvet said as she sat down next to me on the dusty couch.

"We need a light source unless we want to keep bumping into things." Yang countered before cursing again when she hit her foot against a 2x4 piece of wood. "And I doubt that lights still work."

"They most likely don't, but we don't need them anyway. I found some still usable candles. All we need now is some matches or anything to light them." Blake said as she returned with a candelabra. "Anybody has anything we can use?"

"I have some matches." I answered as I reached into my pockets, pulled out some safety matches, and gave them to Blake.

"Why do you have matches?" Velvet asked, curious.

"Let's just say; there was an incident when I was younger that caused me to always have matches on hand." I explained as Blake lit the candles, creating much-needed light and warmth.

"How long do you think the storm will last?" Nora asked, making different shadow puppets with the candle's light.

"The report says that the storm, while fierce, will only last a couple of hours." I answered as I looked at various reports on my scroll before putting it away.

"What should we do in the meantime since we can't use our scrolls?" Yang asked.

"Well, since we have some time, we can listen to Jaune's story." Ruby suggested.

"YES!" Nora cheered as she sat down next to Ruby.

"That would be nice." Velvet said as she moved closer to me. "Especially since there is a nice candlelight."

"You know, I just realized that we're going to listen to a haunted house story inside an abandoned house." Blake commented with a smirk.

"Imagine if it was haunted as well." Yang added, causing the others to chuckle. However, I didn't as I recognized the house and knew who its inhabitants were as I encountered them before. Breathing in, I steeled myself before grabbing my book.

"Alright. Let's begin with the story of The House of No Return." I said as I flipped to the correct page. "We start with a club known throughout the town as The Danger Club. It is comprised of three

young kids that pride themselves on being fearless. However, they wanted another member to join and have been trying to recruit others for a long time. Right now, they are hiding in the bushes of the infamous House of No Return..."

Story

We see an old-looking, worn-out house with the moon shining overhead. The house itself is massive and looks to be one created for the sole purpose of having a happy family. However, that was when the house was still being lived in as it had been abandoned for decades. Now, it stands as an imposing structure to anyone near it, with the dense trees and imposing moonlight warning everyone to stay away. Yet, despite the foreboding and almost sinister feeling in the air, there were those still drawn to the house. More specifically, three young friends and whoever they could get to go inside the house.

"How long has he been in there?" A young female voice asked.

"Exactly ten minutes and thirty-one seconds." A young male voice answered.

"I have to admit; he's got guts." A different young male voice added.

On the edge of the house's property, we saw three young kids crawling through some bushes on the ground. One was female while the other two were male, and each seemed to be in their early teens. Once they felt they had a clear view of the door, they stopped moving and continued to wait.

"Looks like Danger Incorporated is gonna have a new member." The male wearing a hat said, sounding non-too pleased about it.

"Not so fast, Nathan. Doug's gotta stay in there for a whole hour." The other male and apparent leader of the group reminded. He then moved his arm to better look at this watch. "He's still got forty-eight minutes and fifty-four seconds to go."

"No one's ever made it past the five-minute mark." Nathan said as he turned back to look at the house's doors.

"He's probably in there taking a nap." The young female said, annoyed and borderline angry. The three teens then got up and moved to sit behind some bushes as a dog's barking could be heard in the distance.

"Hey, give me more seeds." Nathan told the leader.

"I just gave you a whole handful." He said, annoyed as he opened the bag.

"I ate them." Nathan said, causing the leader to sigh before handing him the bag of seeds. But as soon as Nathan grabbed the bag, the three of them were startled by a loud banging that came from the house. Quickly standing up, they began to look for what caused the noise. "What was that?"

"Time." The female asked, annoyed when they realized it was only the window shutters that startled them.

"He just told us." Nathan complained as the leader checked his watch.

"I'm not waiting out here a whole hour." The girl said before walking up to the house, surprising her friends.

"HEY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Nathan shouted as he and their leader chased after their friend. Reaching the houses, they kneeled behind a bush next to the porch. "You can't let him out."

"Let's admit it. Doug's not scared." The female countered before standing up. But before she could move to the door, the leader grabbed her by the arm.

"No, no, no! Doug has to stay in there for the whole hour." He reminded. "If he makes it, then he's in."

"I hope he doesn't make it. I don't even like him." Nathan commented.

"Neither do I." The female agreed.

"Well, I don't either. But if he makes it, we're stuck with him." The leader added.

"I just want to look inside, see what's he doing." The girl told the others.

"Okay. Go." The leader relented with a sigh.

Satisfied, the girl stood back up and slowly headed to the front door. All the while trying her best to make as little noise as possible. But she also made sure to take her time not to bump into anything as the dim light made it hard to see what was in front of her clearly. Plus, the dogs barking in the distance and the window shutters banging did not help in the slightest. Reaching the top step, she made her way to the wall and slowly moved closer to the doors. The boys, meanwhile, decided to join their friend and made their way up the steps as well.

"I can't see a thing." The girl said as she looked into the door's window but could not see anything due to the woods blocking her view. Moving to the adjacent door, she hoped she could get a better view inside. However, as soon as she placed her face against the window, she jumped away in fright when another face suddenly appeared on the other side of the door. "AAAAAHHHH!"

"SOMEBODY, HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" The person, a young male, screamed as he tried and failed to open the door.

Real World

"Man, the storm is really picking up out there." Yang said when a near-deafening thunderclap sounded right outside the house.

"At least we have shelter, light, snacks, and drinks." Ruby said as Nora helped Yang make sure all the nearby windows were closed and locked.

"And while not much, the candle does provide some-" Blake began before Velvet cut her off.

"Did anybody hear that?" She asked, scared as her eyes darted all over the room.

"No." Everyone else, except Blake, answered.

"What did it sound like?" Blake asked, her cat ears twitching.

'Hopefully not the owners.' I thought, worried.

"Like something banging against something else violently." Velvet answered.

"Possibly just the window shutters banging against the house because of the wind." Yang surmised as she sat back down.

'Yup. The owners sense something.' I thought with a chill going down my spine. *'I should hurry up with the story.'*

"Most likely. The house is in poor condition with many things falling apart." Blake agreed.

"Zwei. Calm down; it's only a storm and window shutters causing the noise." Ruby said, trying to calm down Zwei when he started barking towards the stairs.

"Maybe he senses ghosts." Yang said, chuckling, unaware of how right she was.

"Oh, Jaune. Before you continue, can you tell us the names of the Danger club members?" Velvet asked.

"Of course. The girl's name is Lori. The leader is called Robbie, and the other guy is called Nathan." I answered before deciding to add. "Oh, and there's another kid who will be introduced later in the story. Just in case I forget, his name is Chris Wakely. And the kid the appeared in the window and startled Lori is called Doug."

"He was the one who wanted to join the club with the others not liking him?" Blake asked.

"Yes."

"And why does he have to stay inside the house?" Velvet asked.

"To enter the club, one has to go through an initiation test of sorts where you have to spend an hour inside the house." I explained before finding where I left off. "Okay. After Lori stepped back in fear, the Danger Club realized that it was Doug who was screaming in terror.

Story

"HELP! Something's in here. I can't get out! Somebody help me! LET ME OUT! LET ME OUT!" Doug shouted as he struggled to get the door open.

Yet, none of the kids made a move as they were overcome with shock and confusion. After a few more seconds of struggling, the boy finally managed to open the door. Once open, he immediately ran past the others and away from the house without stopping.

"IT TOUCHED ME- TOUCHED MY FACE! Stay away, you guys. It's in there." Doug warned as he never stopped running away from the house. Still confused, the others slowly walked down the porch, unaware of how deathly quiet it suddenly became. But, as soon as the guy disappeared from view, Nathan turned to the others.

"It touched me. It touched my face." He said in a mocking tone.

"Oh, I knew he wouldn't make it." Robbie said, trying to mask his confusion with a smirk and acting as if he knew everything that would happen.

"They never do." Nathan agreed.

"Good thing. Could you imagine if we had to let him into Danger Incorporated?" Lori asked, relieved.

"Why do we have to let anybody in?" Nathan asked, confused.

"Because we only have three members." Robbie explained.

"Yeah, but there were only three stooges."

"But that wasn't a corporation. A corporation should have a lot of members.

"I guess we have to look for a new member." Lori said, still relived that Doug won't be joining them.

"Someone cool." Nathan added.

"And brave." Robbie also added before pointing to the house, unaware that they were being watched by something inside the house. "Someone who won't freak out in an empty, old house."

"Isn't there one brave kid in this stupid town?" Nathan asked before quickly backpedaling when the other looked at him. "Besides us, of course."

"It touched my face. What do you think he meant?" Lori asked, curious, turning back to the house.

"Oh, he probably just walked into a cobweb or something." Robbie answered with a smirk, thinking it wasn't anything major or actually scary.

"What a chicken." Nathan said, smiling as he shook his head. However, all three of them became scared and startled when a loud banging came from inside the house. And even though they noticed a window shutter banging against the house, they knew that wasn't the cause of the noise. Noticing how deathly quiet it had gotten, plus getting the feeling they were being watched, the three of them finally decided to leave. But as they turned to leave, Nathan searched his pockets and noticed something was missing.

"Hey, where's my money?" He asked as he began to look around with his friends turning around. "I had five lien right here."

"Maybe it fell out when we were shoving Doug into the house." Lori suggested.

"Yeah, it's probably up on the porch." Robbie added while pointing towards the house.

"I had to work hard to get that five lien." Natha complained as he walked towards the porch's steps. Yet, as soon as he reached the base, he stopped dead in his tracks as the dog's barking in the distance and the shudders banging against windows caused fear to creep up his spine. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he turned to his friends and asked. "Why don't you guys help me look for it?"

"Oh, just go get it." Robbie said, annoyed.

"Yeah, don't be a baby." Lori added, equally annoyed.

Steeling himself, Nathan slowly walked up the porch's steps and headed towards the doors. His friends, meanwhile, shook their heads in disbelief as they watched him. Carefully looking around, Nathan soon found his money near the door.

"Oh, great." He said, relieved that he quickly found it.

"Would you hurry up?" Robbie asked, getting impatient.

"I'm coming." Nathan shouted back.

"Let's get out of here." Robbie told Lori as they turned and left.

Sighing, Nathan kneeled and tried to grab his money. However, right before he grabbed it, the door opened with a strange wind sucking the lien into the house. Scared, Nathan stood up and slowly walked back while never taking his eyes off the door. And as soon as he took his third step back, the door suddenly slammed shut.

"HEY, YOU GUYS! WAIT UP!" Nathan shouted as he ran down the steps and after his friends.

Next Day

"But this is your new neighborhood. Don't you want to explore it?" A mother asked her son as they walked down their driveway.

"Not really." Her son, Chris Wakely, answered, smiling.

"Sure you do." His mom said, laughing. "Who knows? You might even meet some new friends here. Come on. Just take a walk, and when you get back, I'll make you some lunch."

"Why don't you just drive me around?" Chris asked, not *really* wanting to explore the new neighborhood.

"Chris." The mom said, smiling.

"Will you make me a cheeseburger when I get back?" Chris asked, smirking.

"Okay." The mom said, smiling as she knew where this was going.

"With bacon?"

"Always making deals."

"Come on, mom. With bacon."

"Okay. With bacon." The mom said, barely able to contain her laughter and joy. She then patted her son's back. "Now go on."

"All right. See you, mom." Chris said, smiling as he walked away from the house. Reaching the sidewalk and unsure where to go next, he decided to simply go across town. But as he walked past the next block, he noticed some local kids resting on one of the benches. "Hey."

"Hey! Check it out." Nathan said, sitting up on top of the bench.

"He's the new kid." Lori said as she and Robbie stood up and walked to the center of the sidewalk.

"Yeah. He probably doesn't have any friends." Robbie said, a plan already forming in his head.

"No friends. The perfect candidate for Danger Incorporated." Lori said, smiling.

"I don't know. He doesn't look very brave." Nathan said as they began to follow Chris. "If you're in Danger Incorporated, you have to be brave."

"True, but if he's not, it'd sure be fun scaring him." Robbie said, a devious smirk on his face.

"HEY!" Lori shouted, getting Chris's attention. "Your name is Chris, right?"

"Yeah. Chris Wakely."

"I'm Lori, and this is Nathan and Robbie."

"Hi."

"Listen." Robbie said as he slung his arm around Chris's shoulders. "You're new in town, right?"

"Yeah. Just moved in last week." Chis answered as they resumed their walk.

"So, you're probably looking for some new friends, someone to hang out with."

"Sure, that'd be great."

"Do you want to join our organization?" Lori asked.

"Danger Incorporated." Nathan added.

"We have room for one more member." Robbie finished.

"Danger Incorporated? What is it?" Chris asked, smirking and curious.

"It's a club for brave people." Nathan answered.

"Oh, well, I'm not very brave."

"You like horror movies, don't you?" Lori asked, shocked as she walked to stand in front of Chris.

"No. Actually, I cover my eyes during the scary parts." Chris explained while taking a step closer to Lori, unaware of Nathan and Robbie snickering behind him.

"Well, you don't have to be *that* brave." Robbie said as he placed his arm around Chris's shoulders again. "You just have to do one thing."

"What's that?" Chris asked as they continued walking.

Half an Hour Later

"Just one hour. If you can make it for one hour, you're in." Nathan said as he came to a stop in front of the gate.

"They call it The House of No Return." Robbie said as they walked through the open, rusted gates. "Go on."

"Years ago, a young couple moved into town. A beautiful young woman and her husband." Lori began with Robbie continuing.

Flashback

'He built this house for her.'

We see the House of No Return in its prime condition. A door soon opens with a man entering soon, followed by his wife.

'Their dream house, a place to raise their child.'

After examining the room, the man and woman embraced each other in a passionate hug.

End Flashback

"But he made a mistake in the construction of the house." Lori said as they gazed upon the house. Even during daylight, the house emitted a foreboding aura to everyone near it. "Their child broke through a weak spot in the floor.

"And fell to her death." Robbie continued.

"The couple were so sad; they slowly went mad." Nathan finished, his voice saying that he didn't care and only wanted to scare Chris.

Flashback

We see the shadow of a man and woman on the wall cast by the lit candles of the room. The woman's shadow showed her losing it while the man was trying to comfort her. All the while, the sounds of thunder could be heard outside.

'Days, weeks, months went by, and the couple never came outside.'

Yet, after a while, the man slowly started to give up.

End Flashback

"One day, the police came. They entered the house. The couple were dead. Their bodies were taken away, and the house was sealed up." Lorrie finished.

"Days later, children from the neighborhood started to disappear." Robbie said, causing Chris to stiffen up.

"Some say they were kidnapped. Others say that the ghosts of the couple took them." Nathan added.

"But it's probably just an empty, old house." Lori said, shrugging.

"So go on in, Chris, and then you can be our new member." Robbie said.

"I don't think so."

"Come on. We'll be right out here." Lori assured.

Have you done it?"

"Uh, done what?"

"Stayed in there for an hour." Chris answered while waving his hand at the house.

"Well, no, but-" Nathan began, unsure of exactly how to answer.

"But, well, we don't have to, you see, 'cause, uh, we started the organization." Robbie stuttered, trying to hide the fact that they were also scared of the house.

"We already know we like danger." Nathan quickly added.

"It's our middle name." Lori added.

"Come on, man." Nathan said, getting impatient.

"We think you're a really cool guy. We want you in our club." Lori told him. "Huh, Robbie?"

"You the man, Chris."

"That's great, but I don't think so. I'll see you guys later." Chris said as he slid past Robbie and left the property.

Real World

"What was that?" Ruby asked, scared as the sound of something heavy moving across the floor greeted our ears.

"I-I'm not sure." Velvet answered, also scared as Zwei's barking became louder.

"Could just be the winds as they seem strong enough to move a night table." Yang said as the winds roared outside. Yet, we could tell that she was uncertain.

"I doubt that." Blake said, ears twitching as she strained her cat ears to see if she could detect if anything else were here with us. But after a few seconds and hearing nothing else, everyone else calmed down. "Seems like Yang was right, and it was only the wind."

"Let's get back to the story then." Velvet said.

"Yeah, I want to see what happens the Lori, Robbie, and Nathan as I don't like them." Nora said.

"Yeah, I can already see what's about to happen. But I'm curious about what will happen to them later in the story." Yang agreed.

'Something that I hope doesn't happen to us.' I thought as goosebumps formed on my skin. "Anyway. After failing to convince Chris to go inside the house, Danger Incorporated returned to their

original spot for the rest of the day. Once it became night, they went to one of their homes to watch a movie and plan out a meeting."

Story

"Danger Incorporated is now in session. Is there any new business?" Robbie asked unenthusiastically. We see an ordinary house with the lights on in one room. Entering the house, we see the three kids sitting on the couch while enjoying some snacks while watching a movie. However, after receiving no answer, Robbie sat straight up. "You mean there's no new business?"

"This is the most boring meeting I've been in." Nathan complained, with a bowl of popcorn in his lap.

"What are you talking about? They are all boring?" Lori asked, sitting up as Robbie placed his hand on his forehead in frustration.

"We need a new member." He said while getting up from the couch, causing Lori to laugh.

"We haven't had a new member since you started this stupid organization." Lori reminded. "You know, that Chris has a lot of nerve turning us down."

"Yeah. He is kind of stuck up, isn't he?"

"Yeah, new kid. I'm a chicken. La-di-da." Nathan mocked, acting like a chicken while Lori laughed.

"Maybe we should teach him a lesson." Lori suggested.

"Yeah. Lesson number one: How to be brave." Robbie said, smiling. Seeing that the others agreed with the plan, he then went over to the phone to call Chris's house.

Chris's house

We see Chri's mom reaching for the phone as the sound of men speaking over the radio could be heard behind her.

"Hello. Yes, hold on, please." Chris's mom said, smiling before turning around. "Chris?"

"For me?" He asked, curious while putting down his book and getting up from the chair.

"Someone named Robbie."

'It's currently 71 degrees. In sports, the international-'

"Hello?" Chris asked, taking the phone while his mother went to the table. "Yeah, sure. That'd be great. All right, I'll see you there. Okay, bye."

"Robbie?" Chris's mom asked as she placed some dishes in the sink while Chris hung up the phone and headed towards the door.

"Yeah, it's this kid I met down the street. He's got two friends, Lori and Nathan. They want me to go hang out with them at the mall."

"Well, I'm glad you're making new friends already."

"Yeah. Maybe this place isn't as bad as I thought it was."

"You see? I told you."

"All right. I'm gonna walk over to Robbie's."

"Chirs."

"Yeah, mom?" He asked, walking back over to his mother.

"They're nice kids?" She asked, worried.

"Yeah, they're alright. I don't think they are too smart, but they're okay. I'll see you later." He answered before kissing her on the

cheek.

"Yeah. Bye-bye."

"Bye, mom." With that said, Chris exited the house and went over to Robbie's house, unaware of what was about to happen.

One Hour Later

We see that there's a full moon tonight as a dark cloud passes the moon.

"So, is this a cool mall?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, it's cool, alright." He answered as they moved past some trees that were only visible due to the moon's light. "This way."

"This must be a shortcut, right?"

"Yeah." The others answered after looking at each other. Smirking, they continued guiding Chris towards their destination. But after a few more minutes, Chirs turned to them, confused.

"You sure this is the way to the mall?" He asked.

"Listen to this. New kid in town, and he's telling us." Nathan said, smirking.

"Really." Lori said, shaking her head as they heard a dog barking nearby. After a couple more seconds, they reached the gate entrance of The House of No Return. When Chris saw the moon creepily peeking over the imposing figure of the house, he felt chills go down his spine.

"Let's cross the street, all right?" He asked, nervous, not wanting to get closer to the house.

"Why?" Robbie asked.

"That place freaks me out." Chris answered while patting Robbie's shoulder, unaware of the others moving behind him.

"NOW!" Robbie shouted as he and Nathan grabbed Chris and dragged him through the gates as Lori opened them.

"WAIT!" Chris shouted, but Robbie silenced him by placing his hand over Chris's mouth.

"Come on." Robbie said as they continued to drag Chris to the house.

"LET ME GO! HELP! HELP ME! HELP!" Chris shouted, hoping that someone would hear him. After a couple more seconds, they were on the house's porch. "LET ME GO!"

"GET THE DOOR!" Robbie ordered. Nathan let go of Chris and quickly opened the door.

"HELP! HELP!" Chirs continued shouting as Nathan grabbed him again and helped Robbie bring him into the house.

"Don't worry, Chris. All you gotta do is stay in there for a whole hour." Robbie struggled to say as they tried to force Chris into the house.

"Yeah. Then we can see how brave you are." Nathan added.

"You can be our newest member."

"We know you can do it." Lori assured. After a few more seconds of struggling, they finally managed to force Chris into the house.

"Bye-bye." Robbie said as they closed the door right as Chris got up from the floor.

"GUYS, LET ME OUT! LET ME OUT, GUYS! COME ON! NOW! LET ME OUT!" Chris demanded as he banged on the door and tried to open it but couldn't as the others were holding it shut.

Real World

"Called it." Yang said, getting my attention. "Knew they were going to toss him into the house against his will."

"Hopefully, he can escape and never see them again." Nora said, unaware of how right she was.

"Yeah, hope- ZWEI CALM DOWN!" Ruby began before shouting when Zwei jumped from her arms and started barking wildly towards the stairs.

"What's wrong with-" Blake began but was cut off when we heard a door slam open with extreme force.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" Velvet shouted, scared as a chilling aura filled the room.

"P-probably the w-wind." Yang answered, uncertain.

"I doubt that, especially since the wind died down not too long ago." I worriedly said as fear crept up my spine as I knew exactly what was happening and would happen soon. Gulping down my fear, I picked up where I left off. "Chris tried desperately to open the door while begging for them to let him out. Unfortunately, they didn't listen and held the door shut, all the while laughing their asses off."

Story

"IT'S NOT FUNNY!" Chris shouted as he tried in vain to open the doors. "COME ON! OPEN UP!"

"I think it's funny." Robbie said, laughing as he and Nathan continued to hold the door shut. However, they were unaware of Lori looking around the house as she felt an eerie feeling come over her.

"YOU GUYS ARE REAL JERKS; YOU KNOW THAT?" Chris shouted.

"WE'LL LET YOU OUT IN ONE HOUR!" Nathan reminded.

Knowing that he wasn't going to be able to open the door, Chris gave up and turned around. As he began looking around the room, he could feel his heart rate rapidly increasing. The moonlight shone through the cracks in the window, causing all the furniture to have eerily creepy shadows. Seeing some steps nearby, Chris made his way over and checked to see if anyone or anything was there. Thankfully, all he saw were cobwebs and menacingly looking shadows. But what kept him on edge was the strange, almost soul-wrenching noises that came from around the house. It sounded as if someone or some *thing* was clearing the path so it could meet him. Hearing something thud right next to him, Chris rapidly back away to the doors and tried to open them again but failed.

"GUYS! LET ME OUT!" He shouted as he yanked on the handles with all his might. "OPEN UP! COME ON! OPEN UP! THERE'S SOMEONE IN HERE!"

"Maybe we shouldn't do this." Lori said, regretting everything as she felt something ominous about the house.

"No. It's just his imagination." Robbie dismissed as he kept the doors shut.

"I know, but-"

"COME ON! OPEN UP, PLEASE!" Chris begged, sounding as if he might break down any moment.

"Fifty-five more minutes, and then we'll let you out." Robbie mocked, barely able to contain his laughter.

"And then you'll be a member of Danger Incorporated." Lori said, completely regretting everything at this point.

"Guys." Chris said, trying his best not to break down in tears.

Seeing that they weren't going to let him out, Chris let out a sigh before moving away from the door. Looking around the room, he made sure no one else was with him before moving to sit on a nearby chair. If he was going to be stuck here for an hour, he might as well get as comfy as he possibly could. However, as he moved away, on the other side of the door, the other had their ears placed against the door to try and hear what Chris was doing. Unfortunately, it proved difficult as the dog's barking seemingly grew louder by the second.

"All right, Chris. Calm down. Old houses make noises. That's just what old houses do." He said as he leaned against the doorframe.

"Do you think he's okay?" Lori asked, worried.

"Hmm." Robbie said, straining his ears to try and hear anything. Meanwhile, Chris turned around and headed towards the nearby chair. Seeing that it was covered in cobwebs, he patted it and recoiled in slight disgust at how much dust flew.

"Gross." He said as he removed the cobwebs before sitting down. Yet, he could not relax as he kept hearing the sounds of wood creaking all around him. "Hello? Is anybody there?"

But only the sounds of chains jiggling and a door creaking open answered his question. Although, he did get scared when a bat came out of nowhere, flew right above his head, and started attacking him.

"Go away." Chris shouted while flailing his arms around. After a couple of seconds, the bat finally had enough and flew away. Breathing hard, Chris stood up from the floor and moved to lean against the wall.

"I'm just going to stand here against this wall. That way, nothing can sneak up on me. I'm just going stand here." He said as he tried to slow his heart rate. Raising his arm, Chris checked his watch and saw that he still had fifty-five more minutes to go before he could

leave. But as he checked the time, he failed to notice that the other had opened the door slightly.

"I think he gave up." Robbie told the others.

"He already stayed in there longer than anyone ever did." Nathan reminded.

"I guess he's going to be our new member." Lori said, still worried.

"Hey, Chris has got a long time to go, all right?" Robbie reminded. "A long time."

Real World

"I doubt he would even want to hang out with them afterward." Nora said, snapping me from the book. Looking towards her, I saw that she was on edge as her eyes darted all over the room.

"If I were in the position, those kids would be having a *very* personal meeting with Ember and Celica." Yang said, slamming one fist into her other hand. Yet, I could tell that she was also on edge as we could now see our breath even though it was not cold enough.

"OKAY, ZWEI! WHAT IS-" Ruby began, about to scold Zwei, who had not stopped barking but stopped when a mysterious voice announced itself.

'We're getting ready.'

"What was that?" Velvet asked, scared as Nora, Yang, Blake, and Ruby got their weapons out. Figuring the voice was what Zwei was barking at, we all turned to the stairs and waited. However, after a couple of minutes and nothing showing up, we relaxed and sat back down. Yet, we remained on edge, especially me since I knew that we only had minutes to get out of here.

"The rain is letting up. We should probably leave as soon as it does." Blake said after a moment while lighting another set of candles.

"Agreed." We all said while continuing to look around the room.

"Alright. After checking his watch again, Chris saw that he had forty-five more minutes to go until he could leave. Not wanting to get taken by surprise again, he walked towards the wall again and leaned his back against it.

Story

Looking around the room, Chris wondered what he could do to pass the time. However, since he had nothing else on him and did not want to leave his spot, he started to whistle. But, not even a second later, he heard chains jingling again, followed by a door opening from above. Yet, before he could look up, he was screamed when he heard something shatter right behind him. Looking down, Chris realized that the vase had fallen from its pedestal. But before Chris could examine it, he froze in shock when he saw a dustpan and broom floating towards him to clean up the mess. As if that wasn't enough, a loud crash sounded next to him, causing him to run back to the stairs. Hearing something creaking, Chris looked to his left and saw the bird from a cuckoo clock slowing coming out. But, to Chris's horror, it slowly turned to face him.

"Beware the House of No Return." It warned before returning inside the clock.

Not sure what to make of this, Chris looked up one last time before turning around. However, he froze in his tracks again when he saw a large wooden board placed against the door and nailed in place. Yet, what caused all the color in Chris's face to drain was what he heard next.

'Don't be afraid, dear child. We're coming. We're coming. We're coming for you.'

Not wanting to stick around, Chris bolted for one of the nearby windows to escape. Only to see that he couldn't do that as

something moved the bookcase in front of the window. Backing up, Chris ran to the front door and tried to pry the wooden board off.

'We're coming. We're coming. We're coming for you.'

Failing to get the wood to even budge, Chris stepped away and tried to figure another way to escape. But unfortunately, it quickly dawned on him that he was trapped. Deciding to confront whatever was speaking, he moved back to the wall and looked up the stairs.

'We're here.'

Gulping down his fear, Chris looked up the steps and saw something that caused him to scream louder than he ever had before in his life.

Outside the House

"WHAT?" Robbie asked, scared as he and Nathan tried to catch their breaths after Lori suddenly screamed.

"Nothing, I just wanted to make sure you were awake."

"Real funny." Nathan said, annoyed as they got comfy on the ground again.

"What time is it, anyway?" Lori asked, curious and still worried.

"Five more seconds." Robbie answered while checking his watch. "Four, three, two, one. Let's go get him."

Smiling, the three stood up and headed towards the house.

"All right, Chris. You made it. You're now a member of Danger Incorporated." Robbie said, smiling as they reached the door. Only to become confused when the door wouldn't open.

"Hey, Chris. Open up." Nathan shouted as Robbie looked through the window to see if he could see Chris.

"What's he doing?" Lori asked, confused.

"I don't know." Robbie answered before turning back to the door and banging on it. "CHRIS! OPEN UP!"

"What should we do?" Nathan asked.

"Break the door down. Ready? On three." Robbie answered. Nathan and Lori rolled their eyes yet got ready. "One. Two. Three."

BANG

"Again." Robbie said after failing the first try. "One. Two. Three."

They managed to force open the door this time. Entering the house, they began to look around as they had never actually been inside before. However, Lori quickly spotted something that confused her.

"Hey, check this out." She said, picking up and showing the others the wooden board that kept the door shut.

"Why would Chris board up the door?" Nathan asked, confused as he took the wooden board from Lori.

"Maybe he didn't." Robbie said, looking towards the stairs.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Lori asked.

"I don't know." Unsure of what to do next, the three of them decided to explore the house to try and find Chris.

"CHRIS!? CHRIS!?" Robbie shouted as they entered the next room.

"Man, this is getting weird." Nathan nervously said as he looked around the room.

"He's probably playing a trick on us." Lori said, annoyed. "CHRIS?"

"YO! CHRIS!" Nathan shouted.

"Well, he's probably just hiding." Robbie said, trying to mask his fear. Spotting a bookcase, he pointed at it before saying. "He's probably behind that bookcase over there."

"He couldn't move that by himself." Lori said when she saw how big the bookcase was.

"Yeah." Robbie agreed. Looking around the room, they tried to find anything that could tell them where Chris went. But after a few seconds and failing to find any, they moved on to the next room. Yet, they felt their fear increase and a sense of dread crawling up their spines with each passing second.

"Hey, how about in there?" Robbie asked, pointing to the other side of the room. "W-hy don't you go check it out?"

"Alone?" Nathan asked, scared.

"I'll go with you." Lori told him. Nodding, they began to cross the room while trying to see if they could spot Chris wherever he was hiding.

"Hey! Wait, wait. I'll come to." Robbie said before running over to them. But as soon as he reached them, they jumped in fear when lightning struck right outside the house, followed by a near-deafening boom of thunder.

"Well, he's not in here." Nathan said, wanting to leave.

"If he's playing a trick on us-" Robbie began, but Lori cut him off.

"You mean like the one we played on him? Huh?" She reminded as tapping could be heard nearby. Soon, another lighting strike happened, followed by more thunder, causing the three of them to jump in fear.

"Come on. Let's keep looking." Robbie said as he led them to the next room. "CHRIS, COME ON OUT! THIS ISN'T FUNNY

ANYMORE!"

"YOU GOT US GOOD, CHRIS! NOW, COME ON!" Nathan shouted as the lightning and thunder increased in frequency and strength.

"Uh, Robbie." Lori said in a petrified tone, getting the other's attention.

"What? What is it?" He asked, worried. But he and Nathan quickly got their answer when they saw that someone or something boarded up the doors again.

"That is too weird." Nathan said as they slowly backed away from the doors.

"Well, Chris probably did that while we were in the other room." Robbie said, trying desperately to keep calm.

'I don't think so.'

"Hello? Who said that?" Lori asked, scared of the male voice they had just heard.

'I did.'

"Chris, is that you?" Robbie asked as the winds started to pick up. Yet, he received no answer. And after another thunderclap, Nathan ran towards the door and tried to pull the wood off the door but stopped when they heard a female voice.

'That won't do you any good.'

'We're coming down.'

Scared, the three slowly back up to the wall. As soon as they were against the wall, the doors suddenly shut themselves violently. Speechless, they began looking around for the source of the voices. However, they quickly found it when they saw two mysterious figures suddenly appear at the top of the stairs. One was a man, and the

other was a lady. But what stuck out the most was that they were wearing wedding attire. Seeing the kids frozen in fear, they began to walk down the stairs as a spotlight appeared on them.

'Children.' The male said with a creepy smile on his face.

'My children.' The lady said in an equally chilling voice.

'Welcome...'

'...To The House of No Return.'

Scared, the three kids quickly moved to the next room in hopes of escaping. Only to realize that they couldn't escape when the doors were locked, and the couple appeared behind them. Once the ghosts stepped inside the room, they closed the last door behind them.

"Wh-where's Chris?" Robbie asked.

'He left.' The male answered.

"Left?" Lori asked, shocked.

'Out the back door.' The lady explained. ' ***We didn't want him to leave. Did we?'***

'Oh, no. We wanted him to stay. We love children.'

'But he made a deal with us.'

"A deal?" Nathan asked.

"What kind of deal?" Robbie asked.

'A very good deal. A real bargain. Oh, yes.' The male answered as he moved to stand behind the kids.

"C-C-Can we make a deal?" Robbie asked.

'Oh, you can never make the kind of deal he made.' The male answered. ***'Very pleasing to my wife.'***

"What kind of bar-bargain was it?" Robbie asked.

'He promised that if we let him go, three children would take his place.'

'Three for one trade.' The female ghost added, sounding beyond happy. ***'Three children.'***

'And you know how much we love children.'

'Now we have three more.'

'He promised you'd come, and here you are, right on schedule.'

"Wh- what are you going to do to us?" Lori asked, frightened.

"Are you going to let us go?" Nathan asked, hopeful.

'Let you go? We can't let you go. We're a family now.' The female ghost answered as she slowly moved towards them.

'We love you.' The male added as he started to close in on them as well.

'And we're going to love you...' The female began while extending her hands towards the kids. ***'Forever.'***

'FOREVER!' The male said, mirroring his wife.

'FOREVER!'

'FOREVER!'

'FOREVER!'

'FOREVER!'

"AAAAHHHHH!" The three kids screamed in terror as the ghosts reached them. And the last thing we see is a lightning strike above the House of No Return.

Real World

"And from that day forward, Lori, Robbie, and Nathan were never seen again. Chris, meanwhile, returned home and pretended that he had dreamt everything that happened that day. The End." I hastily finished before quickly closing the book.

"Wow, looks like the others were right. That was a great cheesy horror story." Blake said, smiling.

"Agreed. That was a great story." Velvet said, worried.

"Thanks." I began but froze when we heard something horrifying.

"What's that?" Yang asked, activating her gauntlets as we looked around.

"Um, guys." Ruby said, getting our attention. Turning to her, we noticed that she was pointing towards the front doors. Looking towards it, we realized that something boarded up the doors like in the story.

'Oh, no.' I thought, worried as the chill returned but much colder.

'Oh, dear children. Sweet children. We're coming.' A voice announced.

"Who said that?" Velvet said, scared as Zwei started barking at the stairs again.

"I don't think we want to stay around to find out." I answered.

'We're here.' Another voice announced.

"AND WE'RE OUT!" Yang shouted as we got up and looked around for another way to escape.

"THE BACK DOOR!" I shouted, pointing towards the door. Not needing a second invitation, we ran into the next room and tried to open the door. Unfortunately, it was locked and wouldn't budge. "Damn it. It's stuck."

"Don't worry. I got this." Nora said, pulling me to the side. She then adjusted her grip on her hammer before striking the door with it. Had we not been struck with fear, we would have wondered how the door wasn't destroyed and simply flew open.

"RUN!" Blake shouted as we ran out of the house and headed towards the airstrip. Luckily, it had stopped raining. Although, we did also realize that it was now late as the moon had fully risen. After a couple of seconds of running, we thought about stopping but quickened our pace when we heard the door slam shut. However, while the others kept running, I slowed down to a stop. Breathing out, I turned around to face the house.

"I'd never thought I would ever step foot into the House of No Return." I said as I caught my breath and calmed down. Looking towards the window next to the back door, I saw the faces of the couple smiling at me before closing the window blinds. Sighing, I was about to turn around but stopped when I heard Zwei barking next to me. Curious, I looked down and saw Zwei barking at the house. Feeling my gaze on him, he stopped barking and looked up at me. But before I could say anything, his eyes glowed a bright yellow, with his pupils turning into black slits.

I didn't even question it. I just ran as fast as possible to catch up to the others. All the while, the sounds of Lori, Robbie, and Nathan came from the House of No Return.

Notes:

Next Chapter: The Werewolf of Fever Swamp.

Since the show is two parts, should it be the same here or the whole thing in one chapter?

Chapter 4

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Story Teller

Chapter 4: The Werewolf of Fever Swamp Part 1

"Damn it." We all said when we arrived at the airstrip and realized that all the bullheads were offline. The only Bullheads that were still operational were for evacuations and emergency purposes only, and we highly doubt our situation would count.

"Now what?" Blake asked, annoyed.

"We have to get back to Beacon before Ms. Goodwitch realizes we're gone." Ruby answered. Beacon has a strict curfew for all students, and missing curfew has severe consequences.

"Perhaps we can walk through the Emerald Forest." Velvet suggested while stepping closer to me.

"Are you sure? It's pretty late, and it will be hard to see what's ahead of us." Yang asked, surprised.

"The moon is shining unnaturally bright tonight. Plus, we all have our weapons to defend ourselves against the Grimm. And Blake and I can hear them coming due to our faunus traits."

"True, and yeah, the moon is unnaturally bright." Yang said as the moon was extremely bright for some strange reason.

"Not only that, but it seems like there will be a full moon tonight." Blake added while ignoring Yang's snicker.

"How is that weird?" Ruby asked, curious.

"The lunar phase, which tells us how much of the moon we will be able to see, says that today is supposed to be a Waxing Crescent

moon, not a full moon."

"That is strange." Ruby said with Zwei barking in agreement.

"What do you say, fearless leader?" Nora asked.

"It is a nice night out despite raining heavily not even an hour ago. Alright." I answered after thinking it over for a moment. However, for some reason, I felt like I had forgotten something.

"Okay then. Let's get going and kick any Grimm's butt that we come across." Ruby excitedly said as she unfurled her scythe.

Chuckling, we turned around and followed Ruby and Zwei away from the airstrip and toward the Emerald Forest. Once we reached the Emerald Forest, we began making our way toward Beacon. Thankfully, as Velvet pointed out earlier, the moon was bright enough to pierce through the trees and give us plenty of light to see our surroundings. Although, I was curious and slightly confused about Velvet as she was practically side-by-side with me. But I didn't mind and assumed she didn't want to get lost or something like that.

However, as we traveled through the Emerald Forest, we became increasingly on edge. While not as heavily populated as the Forever Fall Forest, the Emerald Forest still had plenty of Grimm running around. But, we had yet to see or hear any. It honestly seemed as if the Grimm were trying to avoid this area of the Emerald Forest in any way possible. It's almost as if they were afraid of something, which is ironic as they are attracted to fear. While that might seem strange to some, the tense and ominous feeling in the air certainly reinforced the fact that something was not right. And that feeling intensified when Zwei began barking like mad.

'I better tell Yang and Ruby about what I saw Zwei do earlier.' I thought, recalling how Zwei's eyes glowed yellow and his pupils changed to black slits.

"Zwei, calm down." Ruby said, trying to calm him down but failed as he barked louder.

"Maybe he picked something up on his nose radar." Nora suggested, smiling as she tapped her nose.

"Grimm?" Yang asked while readying her gauntlets.

"Don't think so. Blake and I would have heard them coming already." Velvet answered.

"Then what could-" Blake began but stopped when we heard something that sent chills down our spines.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

"W-WHAT WAS THAT!?" Velvet asked, scared as she clung to my arm with Zwei barking non-stop and even louder.

"I don't know. But I don't think we should stick around to find out." I said as we resumed making our way back to Beacon, albeit at a faster pace.

Although, Ruby had to carry Zwei to prevent him from chasing after whatever made the howl. However, after about ten minutes of walking, we began to feel a great sense of unease as the moon's light started to feel like an enemy. Even the trees began to look menacingly as their shadows loomed over us. The air became heavy, and the smell of rotting meat assaulted our noses, almost causing us to throw up. Yet, our faces paled when we saw some dead Creeps and Beowolves with giant claws and bite marks littered all over their bodies. One even had its intestine ripped out of its body. However, while the others were scared, I wasn't as I felt like I had seen these marks before. And after taking a closer look at our surroundings, I felt the same about where we were.

'Why does this place seem so familiar?' I wondered as I racked my brain for an answer. During the initiation, no student made it this far

away from Beacon, which made it all the weirder as to why I felt like I had been here before today.

"M-maybe we should seek shelter." Nora said, taking out her hammer.

"No. Too risky. We should keep going. I don't think we're too far from Beacon." Yang said, trying to remain calm.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

She failed.

"On second thought, I agree with Nora."

"I do too." Velvet agreed, her ears twitching as she tried to pinpoint the origin of the sound.

"I second that." Ruby added as she struggled to keep Zwei under control.

"But where are we going to find shelter? We're in the middle of the Emerald Forest." Blake asked. But before any of us could answer, Zwei jumped out of Ruby's arms and ran out of sight.

"ZWEI!" Ruby shouted before chasing after him.

"RUBY! WAIT!" Yang shouted as we chased after the young reaper and her dog.

Thankfully, the duo didn't go too far as we reached after only a minute of running. However, once we reached them, we realized why they had stopped as they had stumbled upon a ruined campsite. In the center was a campfire with logs circling it to act as makeshift seats. About ten feet away was a cabin that was in shambles and seemed like a good kick would bring it down. And to the right of us was a swamp that seemed eerily familiar to me.

"Was this place always here?" Yang asked as we examined the place.

"I don't think so; otherwise, Ozpin would have said something or sent someone to clean it up or remove everything." Blake answered as she walked over to the fireplace. Seeing that it was still usable, Blake turned to me. "Jaune. Pass me some matches."

"Here you go." I said as I handed her my matches.

"Thanks." She said as she started the fire.

"You know, despite being in the Emerald Forest, this is kind of nice. The moon offers a roman- I mean nice light, and the fire will keep us warm for the rest of the night." Velvet said as we sat down on a log.

"Ironically, but yeah, it's almost like camping." I agreed, chuckling but tensed when she leaned into me.

"Think there is anything useful in the cabin, Jaune?" Yang asked as she and Blake sat down on a log while Nora and Ruby sat on the one next to them.

"Doubt it. Whoever owned this place clearly abandoned it a long time ago." I answered as I tried my hardest not to blush from Velvet leaning into me.

"Well, it's not like we need anything else. The fire is all we need." Nora said.

"But I am curious about what caused Zwei to run toward here." Ruby said, curious.

"And what we heard earlier." Velvet added.

"I want to say Grimm, but I don't recall hearing anything about them howling like that." Yang said, unsure.

"Maybe some stray dogs." Blake suggested.

"Possible, but it sounded much bigger than any ordinary dog." I said.

"Well, whatever it is, the second time we heard it did sound further away. Maybe it left the area." Nora said.

"But we should remain alert as it might come back." Blake said as she got out her weapon.

"How long should we stay here?" Ruby asked.

"I would say until night passes and the sun comes up." I answered. "It would make it easier and safer to get to Beacon."

"Then what should we do in the meantime?" Yang asked.

"ANOTHER STORY!" Ruby and Nora shouted, causing me to chuckle.

"Alright." I said while grabbing my book. "What story do you guys want to hear this time?"

"Actually, before you do that, care to tell us who you all are and why you all are here." A voice said from behind Yang and Blake. Looking behind them, we saw two kids around our age and a dog walking toward us. However, while the rest were confused, I instantly recognized them.

'Ah, Grady and Cassie. And Grady's dog, Wolf. I can't believe I forgot. Then this must mean we stumbled into Fever Swamp, or what's left of it.' I thought, smiling as it seemed like they remembered me as well.

"Uh, sure. I'm Yang. The one with the cloak is my sister, Ruby. Next to her is Nora."

"That's me!" Nora excitedly said.

"Next to me is Blake. The one with the rabbit ears is Velvet. And next to her is Jaune." Yang finished as she pointed to each one of us.

"And what's the dog's name?" Cassie asked as Zwei and Wolf circled each other in a friendly way.

"That's Zwei." Ruby answered, giggling when Zwei and Wolf began to play with each other.

"Okay, so we now know who you all are, but here comes the tough one. Why are you all here?" Grady asked.

"We were out enjoying the day but had to take shelter when it started to pour. But something spooked us out of the house. Luckily, by then, the rain had stopped. We then realized it was late and tried to get to the bullheads in time but failed. Knowing we still had to Beacon, we decided to walk through the Emerald Forest." Blake answered.

"But as we were walking through the forest, we heard a loud howling sound and decided to seek any shelter we could find." Yang added.

"And then Zwei suddenly dashed away from us and led us to this place." Ruby finished.

"Wait, you guys are heading to Beacon?" Cassie asked, surprised.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" Blake asked, raising her eyebrow.

"Well, for starters, it's not common to see students entering the Emerald Forest for any reason outside of missions or initiation. But secondly, you guys are heading in the opposite direction of Beacon." Grady answered.

"WHAT!?" Yang, Blake, Nora, and Ruby shouted, shocked.

"Yeah. Beacon is that way." Cassie said, pointing toward what we assumed was the direction of Beacon.

"Great. So we just spent an hour walking in the wrong direction." Yang said with a groan.

"Not exactly. Really, you're only five minutes off the trail." Grady said as he and Cassie sat on the last remaining log.

"That's a relief." Velvet said.

"But now that introductions are out of the way, what story were you guys planning on telling?"

"Jaune was about to tell us some of the cool, cheesy horror stories he keeps written down in his book." Nora answered.

"But we still have yet to decide on what kind of story." Yang added.

"Mind if we stay and listen?" Cassie asked.

"Sure. I don't see why not." Blake answered, with the rest of us agreeing. "Oh, before I forget. Did you two know what made that howling sound earlier and what could have attracted Zwei to this place?"

"There is a hermit who lives not too far from here. He likes to play the sounds of wolves howling." Cassie lied.

"Uh, why is he living in the Emerald Forest, and why is he playing the sounds of wolves howling?" Yang asked, confused.

"After his wife and kids died, he moved to the Emerald Forest to be alone. But, about a year later, he gained an unhealthy obsession for wolves and played the sounds of them howling in an attempt to attract some."

"As for your dog, well, he might have just smelled Vandal's scent or the scent of our snacks." Grady answered while pulling out various snacks from his bag. "Want some?"

"Yes, please." We answered.

"Okay, so what story should we listen to?" Ruby asked with a mouthful of candy. Looking to Cassie and Grady, we all nodded as

we knew what story I should tell.

"Actually, I have a story in mind that kind of fits our current situation. Want to hear a short summary?" I asked, smirking.

"Sure." They answered.

"Okay. It goes like this. Grady and Emily didn't want to move to the swamps of the fictional land known as Florida. But their parents-both scientists- said that it would be an adventure they would never forget. That's for sure. First came the horrific howls during the night. Then there was the scary shadow lurking behind the tree and the spooky sounds coming from the swamp. Now Grady can't stop thinking about the spooky Hermit who chased him and his new friend Will while they were exploring the swamp behind his new house. And the almost-human howls that make him sit straight up in bed each night. Could Grady's new dog be responsible for some of the midnight mischief? He does sort of resemble a wolf, and he appeared out of nowhere. Everyone is convinced that the dog is a monster, but Grady knows better. Dogs don't howl at the full moon, or disappear at midnight, or turn into werewolves... or do they? How does this sound?"

"IT SOUNDS AWESOME!" Nora and Ruby answered with Yang and Velvet nodding.

"Sounds suspicious that you have a story like that ready for a situation like this. But I must admit, it does sound interesting." Blake said, raising her eyebrow.

'You have no idea, Blake.' I thought, smirking as I flipped through the pages to the correct story. If she only knew that the book was only a journal of everything that happened to the residents of Arc Town or me.

"Wait. Before we begin, what are your names?" Velvet asked our guests.

"I'm Grady, and this is Cassie."

"Hi."

"And our dog is named Vandal." Grady lied.

"Wait." Velvet said, realizing something.

"What is it, Velvet?" I asked.

"One of the characters in your story has the same name as him."

"Oh, yeah, I just realized that." Yang said.

"Have you met them before, Jaune-Jaune? Like with that girl earlier today?" Nora asked.

"No, just a coincidence." I lied.

"A pretty big coincidence if you ask me." Blake said, eyeing me.

"Anyway. On with the story." I said as I found the story again. "We start off by seeing plenty of dead trees surrounded by a thick fog. Soon, a swamp comes into view that does not seem too appealing and, in fact, comes across as eerie-looking to anyone who stumbles upon it. But just up the path, not too far from the swamp, we see an abandoned house that seems to be falling apart at the seams. Yet, it was not empty as a family had recently moved there."

Story

"What a great space." A lady asked as we entered the house. Inside, we see a lady and her son looking over their newly acquired home. "It's twice as big as your old bedroom, Grady."

"It's kind of... used." Grady said, looking at the stains that covered one corner of the room.

"Well, it's rustic. Rustic's in these days." The mother explained, but it sounded more like she was trying to convince herself.

"Is this a blood stain?" Grady asked, pointing to the stains.

"No. That's just, um, dry rot."

"AAAHHHH!"

Scared of the noise they had just heard, Grady and his mother ran out of the room to see what was wrong. They stepped out into the halls and saw Emily, Grady's sister, visibly distraught.

"EW!" Emily said.

"Emily, what's wrong?" The mother asked, worried.

"That's it. That is it. I don't care what you and dad say; I am not living here."

"What is it now?" The father asked as he exited the room and made his way over to check on his daughter.

"The medicine chest."

Confused by what Emily meant, Grady and his father went into the room and opened the medicine cabinet.

"Cool." Grady said, excited.

"Oh, it's a little corn snake." The father said as he carefully picked up the snake.

"It was a corn snake." Grady told his mom as he exited the room.

"Oh, gross." Emily said, disgusted.

"Hi, there." The father said, smiling as he removed the snake from the medicine chest.

"Give the snake an earring; it'll look like your old boyfriend." Grady mocked.

"Grady, don't be silly. Snakes don't have ears." The mom warned and teased.

"MOM!" Emily said, not believing what she was seeing.

"Emily, we live near a swamp now. You're gonna have to get used to things that crawl and slither." The father said as he exited the room, causing Emily to let out an exasperated sigh.

"Besides yourself." Grady added.

"Oh." Emily said, annoyed.

"Grady. Set this free in the swamp." The father said as he handed the corn snake to him.

"Me?"

"Have fun." Emily teased, smirking as she went back to her room.

"MOM!"

"Go on. A little wildlife never hurt anybody. Just don't go too far in, okay?"

Real World

"You can say that again." Grady said, chuckling alongside Cassie.

"What do you mean?" Velvet asked, curious.

"Nothing. Just something my mom told me when we moved to Vacuo to live there for the summer."

"Anyway, continue, Jaune." Cassie said, smiling.

"Alright." I said as I found where I left off. "After being told to take the corn snake outside, Grady did so and began looking for a safe place to drop off the snake.

Story

Looking around, Grady wondered where he could place the snake so it didn't get immediately harmed. Deciding that the snake would be safer deeper into the swamp, Grady began walking along the path until he felt he was far away enough from the house. Although the sounds of birds chirping did calm his nerves, he still felt uneasy due to all the thick fog and trees around. Nevertheless, he continued forward. And once Grady thought he was far enough, he set the snake down on a tree stump, where it then slithered away.

However, Grady became on edge when he heard animals screaming. And due to the thick fog and echoing of the swamp, he could not tell where it was coming from nor if it was close. Not wanting to stick around for much longer, Grady decided it was for the best to head back home immediately. But he very quickly found out that he was now lost.

"Wait a minute. It wasn't this far."

Growing increasingly on edge, Grady decided to run in another direction in hopes of finding the path back home. And with each passing second, not only did his pace increase but so did his anxiety.

"I'm not lost. I am not lost. I am not lost."

Yet, despite constantly telling himself this, he knew that he was indeed lost. Now starting to panic, Grady began to run away from whatever he felt was chasing after him. But had he not been so focused on what was possibly behind him, he would not have run into the man standing in front of him.

Home

The Next Day

"When summer vacation is over, I am out of here. A boarding school would be better than this hole." Emily said as she and Grady brushed their teeth and got ready for the day ahead.

"You know Emily; you're not the only one who doesn't want to be here. But, at least I'm trying to make the best of it."

"After running into that weirdo in the swamp yesterday, I thought you'd be on my side."

"Mom and dad have been talking about this experiment for years, and I'm not going to be the one to ruin it."

"Gee. And the one time I was counting on you." Emily said as she opened a jar of face cream, only to recoil in disgust when she saw the spider inside. "OHH!"

Not wanting even to touch the jar, Emily threw it in the sink before stepping away and crossing her arms while letting out a huff of irritation. All the while, Grady looked on with amusement while letting out a snicker.

Ten Minutes Later

We now see Grady exiting the house while carrying two large empty cardboard boxes. Going around the house, Grady threw them in the growing pile of other cardboard boxes. Haring the sounds of animals behind him, Grady turned around and spotted some deer nearby in a cage.

"Everything is off the truck." Grady told his dad as he went over to him as his father locked the cage.

"Great." The father said while hanging some wire on the cage. "This place is beginning to feel like home already."

"So, uh, when do you set the deer loose?"

Oh, not for a while yet. Your mom and I have to tag 'em and make sure the trip here hasn't sent any of them into shock." The father answered before turning to look at the swamp while smiling. "Did you ever think that you would be spending your teenage years in a place like Fever Swamp?"

"Not in my wildest dreams." Grady said with his tone saying otherwise.

"Ah, I'll bet you'll make lots of new friends." The father said, causing Grady to remember the incident yesterday.

"Oh, yeah, right. Like that psycho, I ran into last night."

"He's not a psycho. He's a- He's a hermit." The father corrected as he started to check the cage's corner. "I asked about him in town this morning. He lost his family a while ago, and ever since then; he's been a little strange. But he just lives off the land, doesn't harm anybody."

"I don't feel right about this place. It feels so- It just feels so weird."

"Oh, Grady." The father said, wondering what he could tell his son to assure him that everything was fine. "You see these deer here? Up until a couple of days ago, they had never seen a swamp before. Now your mom and I get to study how they're gonna adapt. Believe me; they will because it's just natural to adapt. And pretty soon, they're gonna love it here."

Grady looked toward the deer unconvinced but didn't say anything.

"And so are you."

"Very interesting. Glad I could be a part of your study." Grady said, upset. He then headed back inside the house, leaving behind his confused father.

Nighttime

We see Grady now fiddling with the television in hopes of getting it to work so he can have some form of entertainment. Unfortunately, all he got was static despite his best attempts and moving around the makeshift antenna.

"Grady. That's really annoying." The mother warned as she and the father worked on their laptop.

Not giving up, Grady ignored his parents and kept flicking through the channels while holding the antenna to try and get some sort of working signal.

"GRADY!" The father said, irritated.

"There's nothing to do here." Grady complained while standing up after putting the antenna on the television. However, all he got in return was an exasperated look from his parents before they went back to work. Looking toward his sister and seeing her busy as well, Grady decided to back up to his room and call it a night. Although, that proved to be challenging as the deer kept braying all throughout the night.

The Next Day

We see Grady playing ball by tossing it at the shed and catching it when it comes back toward him. But he put too much power in the second throw, causing the ball to bounce off the shed and fly farther away from him. Sighing, Grady turned around and began to go after the ball. Yet, another kid picked it up before he reached where it stopped.

"I saw you move in yesterday." The kid said as he threw the ball into his other hand.

"You live here? I didn't know any kids lived here."

"People don't usually move into Fever Swamp. They move out." The kid explained before handing Grady the ball back. "Hi, I'm Will Blake.

And I live over there."

"Grady Tucker."

"So, what are those deer you got in that pen for?"

"Well, my parents are scientists. They're studying how the deer will adapt to the swamp."

"Scientists, huh? We don't get many scientists around here."

"It sounds like you don't get much of anything." Grady said, chuckling.

"Yeah. It's old-timers mostly. We're the only kids here." Will explained as they began to walk away. "I bet you had lots of friends where you came from."

"Yeah, like twenty right on my street."

"Oh, that must have been great."

"It was." Grady answered before running on ahead while smiling. "So, uh, do you want to play catch? You got a mitt?"

"Uh, I'm not much for baseball." Will said as he walked up and handed Grady the ball back. "I got some targets out back. You've got a B.B. gun, don't you?"

"Our family kinda doesn't believe in guns."

"Oh." Will said, unsure of what they could now. But before he could begin to think about what they could do next to pass the time, an animal snarling caught their attention. Yet, unbeknownst to Grady, Will began to smirk. "You been in yet?"

"Yesterday."

"Did you get lost?"

"Yeah."

"People say that the swamp starts to grow inside your head. You get confused, turned around. Sometimes people go in and are never heard from again." Will said before turning to look at Grady's house. "You know why your parents got that house so cheap?"

"Yeah, because it's a piece of garbage."

"No. 'Cause, the old lady who lived there went into the swamp one day and never came out." Will said, causing a chill to go down Grady's spine. He then went over to the edge and smiled. "So, let's check it out."

"Wait a second."

"It's okay. I know my way around." Will assured. Grady still seemed unconvinced but gave in, threw his mitt away, and made his way over to Will.

Real World

"You know, looking back at it, it's pretty obvious." Grady said, getting out attention.

"What is?" Nora asked.

"Uh, um. That it was easy seeing our friend, also coincidently named Will, tricking us into going into some scary woods." Cassie quickly lied.

"Wow. Two for two in names. Talk about a coincidence." Yang said, shocked.

"Almost too much of a coincidence if you ask me." Blake said.

"Are you sure you haven't met them before, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"Nope." I lied.

"Where is your friend?" Ruby asked as she petted Zwei, who fell asleep next to Wolf.

"Ah, he's dead." Cassie answered, causing everyone to tense.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"How did he die?" Blake asked.

"He was setting up a net to try and catch some fish or alligators. Unfortunately, the net got tangled in the water, and he could not pull it out as it was stuck. But when he went in to retrieve it, he got trapped in the net, which then sunk to the bottom of the swamp where he drowned." Grady answered.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Velvet said.

"It's fine. Will was suffering from a disease so bad that he was constantly suffering. So, in some ways, it's a relief that he is now at ease." Cassie said.

"How about we continue the story?" Yang suggested. Nodding, I picked up where I left off.

Story

"This is incredible." Grady excitedly said as he followed Will through the swamp. "Dinosaurs used to live in places like this."

"They still do. Alligators." Will said as they continued walking. "You know, some of the most successful predators live in swamps and jungles."

"So, how do they call it Fever Swamp?"

"'Cause people around here believe there's a fever that comes from this swamp. It makes your body hot like an oven, and it gets inside your head and starts boiling your brain. Makes you do crazy things. Even makes you run into the swamp and stay there."

"Maybe we shouldn't be here." Grady said, scared. But his fear grew tremendously when they both heard an animal loudly snarling.

"Oh, no! We gotta get out of here!"

"What is it?"

"Shut up and run!"

Confused, Grady turned around to try and spot what made the growling sound, only to see a mysterious figure running through the woods. Fearing for his safety, Grady ran after Will as fast as possible. But after running for a few seconds, Grady suddenly fell to the floor when something grabbed onto his leg. Hearing footsteps behind him, Grady turned around and saw the mysterious figure slowly getting closer.

"Over here." He heard Will say. Turning to where it came from, Grady saw will hiding behind a tree and a fallen tree. Getting up, Grady quickly dashed over there just as the figure arrived.

"The Swamp Hermit. I thought he only came out at night." Will said, sounding surprised before gently pushing Grandy to signal to him to follow after the Hermit quietly.

"I saw that guy yesterday." Grady said as they watched the Hermit prepare something.

"It's lucky he didn't see you."

"He did see me."

"That's bad, Grady." Will said as they moved to a better position to spy on the Hermit more easily. "They can't prove it, but he's the real reason people keep disappearing."

"My dad says he's harmless."

"Don't believe it. He's been roaming around this swamp for fifty, sixty years."

"Come on. He can't be that old."

"He's even older than that. People like him don't age like the rest of us."

"It's impossible."

"It's true. He'll never get a day older as long as he keeps finding victims." Will explained as they watched the Hermit enter his house. "The moon is full tonight. You'll hear him howling, and you'll know exactly what he is. Nothing else on earth howls like that."

"Like what?"

"Like a werewolf."

Nighttime

We see Grady helping his family out in the kitchen. However, he soon goes over to the door and looks out the glass panel to see the full moon. Ever since Grady returned home, he could not stop thinking about what Will said earlier about the Hermit being a werewolf. And not a second after Grady looked out the window, he heard the sounds of something howling.

"Dad. Why can't I drive into town? I have a license, you know?" Emily asked.

"You just got your license, and you don't know the roads." The father answered.

"So, I'll drive slow."

"Is there any mail for me, like from my friends?" Grady asked as he set a bowl on the table.

"Mail doesn't come until Wednesday." The mother answered.

"Amazing it comes at all." Emily said, annoyed.

"I hear you met the neighbor boy today. What's he like?" The mother asked as she sat down at her spot.

"He's okay."

"Yeah?"

"Without a car, I'll never meet anyone my own age." Emily complained.

"Oh, Emily. Come on. It's not like we're on the moon." The father said, tired.

"His name's Will. You know what he said?" Grady said as he cut through some bread with his knife. "He said there's a fever you get from the swamp. The fever boils your brain and makes you go nuts."

"That's ridiculous." The mother said.

"Are you sure? Did you know that a lot of people have disappeared around here? Did you know that the lady that owned this house disappeared? But Will knows what got her. A werewolf."

"Well, that's just great. Werewolves." Emily said, scoffing.

"I don't know about this, Will." The mother said, skeptical as she put some food on her plate.

"Will knows the swamp, mom." Grady countered. "And you know who he thinks that werewolf is? The Swamp Hermit."

"All right. I heard just about enough." The father said, tired. "Now listen. There is no such thing as a werewolf. Those stories are just old folk legends. There has never been a shred of scientific evidence. And also, there's no such fever as the one you described.

And as I told you before, that old Hermit is a harmless old eccentric who has never hurt anyone."

"Or no one's lived to tell about it." Grandy said, causing everyone to let out an exasperated sigh.

Later That Night

We see Grady sleeping in his bed. However, it was not a peaceful slumber as he constantly tossed and turned. But after a couple of minutes, Grady woke up in a cold sweat. And as he tried to calm his beating heart, he wiped the sweat off his neck and forehead.

"No!" He said before getting out of bed and racing toward the bathroom. He turned on the lights before moving to open the medicine cabinet and taking out a thermometer. And once it beeped a few seconds later, he took it out and smiled. "Normal."

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

Stepping out of the bathroom, Grady walked down the hall to the window, peered out, and noticed that the moon was full tonight.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

Looking down toward the deer pen, Grady saw them huddled together as if they were afraid of something. Or perhaps they sensed whatever was howling was close by and knew it was a threat. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Grady opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony to get a better look at the house's surroundings. But after hearing something race through the nearby trees, Grady ran back inside, closed the door, and sprinted down the stairs to the front door, where he proceeded to lock it.

But he did not stop there as he moved to the living room and locked each window. However, before Grady could continue, he froze in place when the handle of the back door started to jiggle. But strangely enough, the door was already ajar. Fearing the worst,

Grady slowly moved to close the door and lock it. Yet, as soon as he reached the door, it flew open with an animal jumping on him.

"AAHHH!" Grady screamed when whatever pounced on him forced him to the ground.

Real World

"Wow. Another coincidence. That's how Vandal and I met." Grady said as he petted a sleeping Wolf.

"Really?" Blake asked.

"More or less. The only part that's the same is Vandal barging through the back door of our home. But instead of whatever caused the dog in the story to do it, Vandal was attracted to the scent of cooked meat. We had a barbecue at the time."

"Is that why you named him Vandal?" Yang asked, curious.

"The breaking and entering no. The destroying all the plates and containers to get to the food, yes." Grady explained as Wolf let out a content yawn in his sleep.

"And your parents let you keep him?" Nora asked, surprised.

"Yup. We're big animal lovers. Heck, at the time, we were even planning on visiting the animal shelter to adopt a dog."

"Where are your parents?" Velvet asked.

"Back home. Cassie and I like to hang out and go into the woods exploring."

"But why the Emerald Forest?" Ruby asked.

"It reminds us of the first time we met." Cassie explained.

"But enough questions for now. Let's continue with the story." Grady said, motioning for me to continue.

"After the door flew open with the dog pouncing on him afterward, Grady began to shout while trying to get the dog off him."

Story

"I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" Grady shouted as he tried to get the dog off him.

"Grady?" The mother asked as she put on her robes while exiting her room.

"HE'S GOING TO KILL ME! HELP!"

"GRADY! GO AWAY!" The mom said after turning on the lights. She then pushed the dog off and helped her son to his feet. "Honey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." He answered, panting. Once he calmed down enough, the mother, Emily, and Grady turned back to the dog and saw that it had also calmed down.

"That was trying to kill you?" Emily asked, smiling as the dog calmly looked at each of them.

"Did I hear someone screaming?" The father asked as he entered the house and closed the door behind him.

"It was Grady. He was being licked to death."

"Where were you? You missed all the excitement." The mother asked, smiling.

"Something upset the deer. I went out to check 'em." The father answered as he began to pet the dog.

"You left the door open." Grady said as he walked over to the dog.

"Well, I think we found our culprit." The mother said.

"Hey, boy."

"He is huge." The father said, surprised at the size of the dog.

"So that's who's been howling. What are you doing scaring people like that? Huh, boy?"

"Wonder who he belongs to?" The mother asked.

"No collar. No tags. He's probably a stray." Grady said as he looked for anything that could tell who the owner was but didn't find any.

"Well, he seems friendly enough."

"Can we keep him for a while? I bet he'll make a great watchdog." Grady asked, hopeful.

"I don't know, Grady." The father said, unsure.

"Oh, come on, dad. Life in the country is not complete without a dog." Grady said, trying his best to convince his father. "You want to live here; you got to take the whole package."

"We'll see."

"Come on, Dad."

"Okay. I'll tell you what. I'll check in town. If nobody comes to claim him, then we'll talk about it." The father relented before quickly adding. "But he sleeps outside."

"Deal."

"Excuse me. Doesn't anyone care about what I think?" Emily asked in disbelief, only for the dog to bark in answer.

"See? Someone cares." Grady said, smiling.

Next Day

We see the father feeding the deers and making sure they are alright while Grady plays with his new dog in front of the house.

"Come on, boy. There you go. Here we go. Come on. That's okay." Grady said as he kicked around a soccer ball while the dog chased after it. And from the porch, the mother smiled at her son while she fixed a telescope. "How long's it been since you had someone to play with? Huh, boy?"

The dog answered the universal dog's way by licking Grady's face.

"Neither of us has to worry about it anymore."

"Don't get too attached to that dog, Grady. He might have a home." The mother reminded.

"I'm thinking about calling him Wolf because he looks like one." Grady said as he walked over to his mom while Wolf continued to play with the soccer ball.

"What'd you bring that out for?" Emily asked when she spotted her mother working on the telescope.

"There's going to be a full moon tonight." The mother answered.

"Full moon?" Grady asked, worried.

"It will be spectacular. The sun, the moon, and the earth will be lined up so the earth's shadow will pass over the moon. A lunar eclipse." The mother explained.

"Ooh. Can I still get some tickets?" Emily asked, not impressed.

"Some day, something is going to impress you kids." The mother said as Emily walked away. "I just hope I'm around to see it."

But she didn't realize her words set Grady on edge as he began scanning the sky.

A Few Hours Later

"Did you hear the howling last night?" Will asked Grady as they walked through the swamp.

"Yeah, it was Wolf." Grady answered as Vandal ran on ahead.

"Is that what you think?"

"Come here, boy." Grady said, with Wolf coming right over. They then continued walking through the swamp. "Good boy. Don't worry. If that Swamp Hermit comes around, Vandal will smell him a mile away. Won't you, boy. But anyway, what's this stuff tied to the trees?"

"Wolfsbane. It's supposed to ward off werewolves. Of course, educated people know it doesn't work."

"Oh, right. The educated people use silver bullets."

"Shows how much you know. The fact is werewolves invented that silver bullet story themselves, so poor people couldn't afford to hunt them down."

"Were-folk?" Grady asked, confused.

"I suppose you'd call them were-persons." Will teased.

Smirking, they went under some branches and continued walking through the swamp and after Wolf.

"Maybe we should go back. I don't know this part of the swamp." Will said while looking around.

"WOAH!" Grady suddenly shouted as the ground underneath him gave way, causing him to fall down the hill. Seeing his new owner fall down, Wolf got on his four legs and began barking. Will attempted to

try and save Grady but couldn't see him. Luckily, Grady managed to grab onto a vine to stop himself from going into the swamp water. Finally spotting Grady, Will ran down the hill to try and help him.

"WOW!" Will said, stopped in his track when he saw the bog.

"Where are we?" Grady painfully asked.

"The bog is the heart of the swamp. Right in its very center. A couple of years ago, a kid fell in. Sucked him down like quicksand." Will began as Grady got up and slowly made his way to safety. "There's no telling what's down there."

"I wonder how deep it is."

"Let's find out." Will said as he walked further on the fallen tree that he was standing on. He then laid on his stomach and reached into the bog's water.

"What's it feel like?"

"Like green, slimy mashed potatoes. Ah, this is too gross." Will answered. However, he became worried when he tried to pull his arm out of the water but couldn't. "Hey. Hey, wait a second!"

"What is it?"

"Something's got me. HELP! HELP ME!" Not wasting a second, Grady immediately laid down and tried to help Will free his arm. "There's something down there. It got my arm."

Grunting, Grady used all his strength and together managed to free Will's arm from the bog, only to realize that it was only a shoe that trapped Will's arm.

"Oh, it was only a shoe." Will said as they stood up. Grady tried to grab the show, but Will pulled away in time. "Sucker."

"You're not funny." Grady said as he swiped the show from Will.

"Oh, man. That was awesome. You should've seen the look on your face." Will said, laughing. "Come on, Grady. I couldn't help myself."

But all he got in return was Grady glaring at him while he put his show on. However, they tensed up when they heard Wolf barking not too far away. Worried, they climbed up the hill to check on him.

"What's the matter, boy?" Grady asked as Wolf continued to bark.

"Somebody's watching us." Will said as he looked toward the nearby trees. But it proved difficult to see anything due to the fog. Grady tried to see if he could spot anything but failed.

"I thought you said that didn't work." Grady asked when Will picked up some wolfsbane and gave it to him.

"Do you believe everything you hear?"

"Come on. Let's get out of here. Come on, boy." Tapping Wolf's head, they rushed back home with Vandal right behind them.

Home

We see Emily looking at the deer as she passes by their pen while listening to her cassette player.

"Oh, how cute. A bunny." She said, smiling as she kneeled next to what she assumed was a sleeping bunny. However, when she turned the bunny to its side in an attempt to wake it up, she discovered something so horrifying that it caused her to scream in terror.

Ten Minutes Later

We see the father, mother, and Emily standing around a table in their basement. The father seemed disturbed as he worked on something with some of his tools. Knowing that her daughter was still visibly shaken, the mother went over to her to try and console her.

It was horrible, mom." Emily said, upset. She then moved to sit in a nearby chair. "It was just sitting there... looking up at me with those big, innocent eyes. So I reached out to pet it."

"Well, honey, didn't you realize something was wrong when it didn't run away?" The mother asked.

"I thought it like me."

"What's wrong?" Grady asked as he entered the basement and saw everyone sorrowful.

"It's that stupid dog. I know it is. We should have taken it right to the pound when we found it." Emily said, causing the father to turn to her.

"Hey. You leave Wolf alone. He's not bothering anyone."

"I'm not so sure about that, Grady." The mother said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come take a look." The father answered.

"Stay." Grady ordered Vandal before walking over to the table. "Oh, that's sick dad."

"It was mauled by some predator." He explained before setting down his tools. "Just like half a dozen other animals in the area last night."

"It just killed them for no reason." Emily added.

"Oh, come on, dad." Grady said, not believing Emily. "Wolf didn't do this. I mean, look at him."

"Bite marks are canine."

"So what? It could have been anything. It could have been a wolf."

"Grady. There are no wolves in the swamp." The mother said.

"How do you know?" Grady asked, irritated, before walking away.

"Look, the swamp's a pretty brutal place, you know? If that dog's been living there, he could have become just as brutal." The father said as he put his tools away, grabbed a collar from a drawer, walked over to Wolf, and put it around his neck.

"And he was outside all night." The mother added.

"The bite marks. I bet they're big, right? Too big for Wolf." Grady asked, hopeful that would prove Vandal was innocent.

"No, Grady. They're not. We think it was Wolf."

"IT'S NOT WOLF!" Grady shouted, trying to keep himself together. "There might be something going on out there, but it has nothing to do with my dog."

"We'll get you a new dog." The father said, standing up.

"NO!" Grady shouted, with Wolf whimpering afterward. "It's okay, boy. No one's going to hurt you. I'll make sure of it."

He stood up and looked at everyone with a determined gaze.

"I don't want another dog." He said before leaving with Wolf.

"He's completely irrational. Maybe he has that swamp fever he's been babbling about." Emily said, showing that she really didn't care for the bunny and just wanted Wolf gone.

Half an Hour Later

"It's the Swamp Hermit killing all those animals." Will said as he and Grady ran through the swamp.

"I've got to find his shack. I can't let them blame it on Wolf. They'll take him away." Grady said, determined to prove that Wolf was innocent.

"Oh, man. No one actually goes looking for the Swamp Hermit." Will said, shocked. He then ran and grabbed Grady's arm to get him to stop walking. "Getting yourself wasted isn't going to help your dog."

"Well, if you're that scared, then go home. I'll do it myself."

"Oh, I wish I'd never told you." Will said, exasperated. Knowing that he wouldn't sway Grady, he relented when he saw him resuming his path to the Hermit's place. "All right. I'll go. But I'm outta there before the moon rises."

Running after Grady, they continued making their way to the Hermit's home. And after about ten minutes, they finally found the place. Although, they were confused when they saw wolfsbane all over the place. Walking up to the home, Grady began looking for a way to get inside.

"One bite. One bite, man. That's all it takes, and you'll be just like him- a werewolf. If he kills you, you're lucky." Will said as they continued to look for a way inside the Hermit's home. "You see anything, werewolf?"

"I don't know. It's dark in there." Grady answered as he looked inside through a window. However, both Will and he screamed when the face of the Swamp Hermit suddenly appeared on the other side. Seeing that they were caught, both ran as fast as possible to try and escape as the Hermit chased after them. And it seemed like they would successfully escape as they kept putting distance between themselves and the Hermit. Unfortunately, it didn't last as Grady set off a trap the Hermit set.

"WILL! GET ME OUT OF HERE!" Grady shouted as he was trapped inside a net. "Will! GET ME OUT OF THIS THING! WILL! HELP!"

For a moment, it seemed like Will would help Grady escape the net. However, Will became paralyzed in fear when the Hermit finally reached them. And after a moment, Will ran off, leaving behind a terrified Grady and smiling Hermit.

"WILL!"

Real World

"Uh, I'll be right back." Grady suddenly said, standing up.

"What's wrong?" Yang asked.

"I-I'll be right back. I just need to grab something. I'll be back in a moment." He vaguely answered before running into the woods.

"Should we go after him?" Blake asked Cassie.

"He's fine. He will explain it better when he gets back." She answered.

"Alright. But since Grady will be gone for only a few moments, how about we wait until he gets back." Nora suggested, with the others nodding in agreement.

"Alright. We'll wait. And it will give my throat a short rest." I said as I closed the book. However, Yang, Ruby, Velvet, Nora, and Blake became on edge when we heard the howling again.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

However, Cassie, Wolf, and I knew the real reason as the Full Moon shone brightly on us.

Notes:

Part 2 will come out soon.

Chapter 5

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Story Teller

Chapter 5: The Werewolf of Fever Swamp Part 2

"Okay. I'm back." Grady said as she came back and sat down next to Emily.

"Um, why are you wearing a sweater and a scarf covering your face?" Yang asked, confused when she saw Grady wearing a thick sweater with the hood up and a scarf covering the bottom half of his face.

"Medical condition that I'm not comfortable talking about, plus I get cold quickly as I'm not used to these temperatures." He lied before pulling the scarf up a bit. "Anyway, shall we continue."

"Sure." I said as I found where I left off. But before I could begin, Velvet cut me off.

"Wait. Before you continue, Jaune." She said before turning to Cassie and Grady. She then pointed to the cabin behind them. "Do you two know what's in that cabin?"

"Nothing important. Really, there's only a chest there that we placed there a while back. It only holds some supplies and emergency supplies." Cassie answered.

"Aren't you worried that it might collapse at any moment?" Ruby asked.

"Nah. It might look all beaten up, but it is extremely sturdy and can withstand any nature throws at it."

"I doubt that." Blake said, eyeing the condition of the cabin.

"Anyway. Let's continue the story." I said. "After getting caught in the net, Will tried to rescue Grady but ran away when the Hermit caught up to them. Yet, despite Will running away, Grady kept calling out Will's name, hoping he would return."

Story

"WILL!" Grady shouted one last time while struggling against the net. "I'M SORRY! I SWEAR I WON'T COME AROUND HERE AGAIN!"

Unfortunately, it fell on deaf ears as the Hermit came closer to the net. Grady then remembered that he had some wolfsbane. Taking it out of his pocket, Grady then reached out of the net and tried to use it to ward off the Hermit. However, that only seemed to infuriate the Hermit as he growled before grabbing the wolfsbane and throwing it to the floor.

"What are you going to do?" Grady asked as the Hermit lowered the net to the ground. "HELP! NO! NO! LET ME OUT OF HERE! LET ME GO! OW!"

Ignoring Grady's screams, the Hermit began to drag him back to his home. And after ten minutes of struggling, they finally reached the Hermit's home. Entering and closing the door behind him, the Hermit locked the door while Grady continued to panic in the corner of the room.

"LET ME GO! GET ME OUT OF HERE! I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" Grady shouted, only to get a growl from the Hermit in return. He then walked to the other side of the cabin and began looking for something. "What are you going to do with me? You can't keep me here. Everyone will be looking for me."

The glare the Hermit sent Grady's way made him go quiet.

"Just let me go. Please. I won't tell anyone. I promise. I won't tell." Grady panted as he watched the Hermit sit down in his chair and eat a chicken leg. However, due to their close proximity, Grady could

make out the Hermit's long nails and suspiciously long arm hair. "If you let me go, I'll never come back here, ever. You'll never see me again."

But Grady only got a glare and silence in return as the Hermit continued eating his food.

"My parents are probably on their way now, and they got guns. Really big guns. Have you ever seen an elephant rifle?" Grady warned.

Having had enough, the Hermit put his food away, got out of his chair, and grabbed the gun next to the nearby table. He then walked over to Grady and showed him a close-up of his weapon before hanging it on the wall. The Hermit then kneeled to be face-to-face with Grady. But before he could say anything, the sounds of owls hooting caught his attention. Turning to look out the open door, the Hermit saw that the sun had set and the full moon was nearly finished rising. The Hermit turned back to Grady and examined him for a second before becoming confused. He then stood up and exited his home.

Seeing his chance, Grady took out a knife and began to cut through the net. Although, it became increasingly difficult to concentrate with the Hermit howling at the moon. But after a few seconds, Grady managed to create an opening big enough for him to escape. Seeing that the Hermit was still busy howling at the moon, Grady slowly crawled backward. And because Grady wasn't paying attention to where he was going, he inadvertently crawled through an opening in the Hermit's home. But he wasn't going to waste this opportunity as he got up and ran for his life. Yet, the Hermit was aware that Grady had escaped. And once Grady was out of sight, the Hermit looked toward the moon and saw that it had finally stopped rising.

Real World

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

"Okay. I wish that guy would stop howling." Yang said, slightly annoyed but still scared.

"It is getting annoying." Blake agreed.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

"Okay. That sounded way too close for comfort." Velvet said, looking back and forth around the camp.

"Sorry. That was me." Nora sheepishly said before letting out a much quieter howl.

"Zwei? What's the matter?" Ruby asked when Zwei suddenly barked at Grady.

"Maybe he's hungry?" Cassie suggested.

"Maybe." Ruby said before turning to me. "Did you feed Zwei while we were in detention, Jaune?"

"Yeah. A few chicken legs and bones."

"What time?"

"About an hour before you guys found me at the restaurant."

"Yeah, maybe your dog is hungry." Grady said, moving slightly backward.

"But what are we going to do? It's not like we have any food?" Yang asked.

"We have some dog food and treats in the cabin. Be right back." Cassie said before getting up and heading into the cabin. A few moments later, she returned with some treats and gave one to Wolf and Zwei. Yet, as Zwei ate his food, he kept looking back at Grady.

"So, shall we continue?" Velvet asked before leaning into me again.

"Alright." I said before clearing my throat. "After escaping the Hermit's home, Grady ran as fast as possible back to his home with the intent of telling his family what had just happened."

Story

"MOM!" Grady shouted as he closed and locked the front door. "MOM!"

"Grady? What's wrong?" The mother asked as she raced down the stairs.

"Mom. We got to get out of here."

"What's happened to you? Where have you been?" The mother asked as she stopped Grady from locking the kitchen window.

"We gotta go to a motel. Anywhere, just as long as we are away from the swamp." Grady rapidly said as his body was still running on adrenaline. He then walked over to the other kitchen door. "DAD!"

"Alright. I've had just about enough." The mother said, becoming massively worried as her son walked over to look out the kitchen window again. "You're really beginning to worry me, Grady."

"You should be scared. DAD!"

"Your father went out to get some supplies. Emily took the other car into town. Now, unless you're planning on hitchhiking, nobody's going anywhere." The mother said but became distraught when her son became more anxious. "Grady. Honey, you got to tell me what's wrong."

"It's that Swamp Hermit, mom."

"What happened? Did he hurt you?"

"No. Not exactly."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No."

"What then?"

"H-he's a werewolf."

"Oh, I don't have time for this." The mother said, exasperated and annoyed.

"Oh, come on, mom. You got to listen to me." Grady said before trying a different approach. "You and dad base everything on science, right? Things you can prove and explain. But what if the world isn't always like that? What if you knew something was true, but you couldn't prove it? Something horrible you knew could never be explained. What would you do then?"

CLANK

"What was that?" The mother asked, scared.

Worried, Grady and his mother slowly walked over to the window to try and find out what was making the strange clanking noise. And as they neared the window, they heard Wolf barking like mad. Almost as if he was trying to scare something away. However, they both jumped in fear when a deer suddenly burst through the window, almost as if something violently threw it at the house. But to their horror, the deer was still alive and trying to escape.

"Oh. Oh, no! Wolf." Grady said, remembering that Wolf was still outside. But as soon as he exited the house, Wolf quieted down and began to whimper in fear.

"Oh, no. The deer." The mother said when she saw the deer's pen condition.

"Wolf, what is it?" Grady asked as he checked on his dog while his mother ran over to the deer pen.

"Oh, no." The mother said when she saw a dead dear. Yet, what shook her to her core was the fact that it was not a clean kill but rather something brutally killed the deer. Seeing a broken piece of wood nearby, the mother picked it up and saw bite marks that looked distinctly canine. "Grady, go call the sheriff to get rid of that dog."

"Mom, you can't think Wolf did this?" Grady said, running over to his dog. "Do you think a dog can do that to a fence?"

"It's going to take all night to catch these deer." The mother said, not caring. "Are you going to help me, or do I have to do this myself?"

"You saw it, didn't you, boy? Don't worry. I won't let it near you again." Grady said, trying to calm his dog. However, he panicked when his mother came and tried to remove the collar. "MOM, NO! You don't know what you are doing!"

"I'm sorry, Grady. It has to be done."

Real World

"OH! COME ON!" Yang and Ruby suddenly shouted, startling everyone, including Zwei and Wolf.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The fact that the mother still thinks a dog can tear through a metal chain fence and kill those deer." Yang answered.

"And doesn't she remember the deer thrown into the window!" Ruby added.

"She does seem a bit biased toward her work." Nora agreed.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm not particularly fond of dogs in general." Blake said, eyeing Zwei. "But even I would know that a regular dog would be unable to tear through a chain fence."

"I think that Grady can't be left out as he now wants to leave the swamp, all because he believed the tale Will told him." Velvet countered before adding. "But, yeah. I think the mom is being a bit too mean."

"But you have to understand, they are both devoted scientists, and this project was a dream of theirs for many years. And now, their son wants to leave because he believed this folk tale this random kid told him. Plus, I was- I mean, their kid didn't care anymore for their dream and only cared for the dog he found." Grady explained but nearly gave himself away. Thankfully, he managed to catch himself in time.

"Not to mention that Grady, the one in the story, went exploring where he wasn't supposed to and trespassed on the Hermit's home." Cassie added.

"True. But the mother is still being irrational." Ruby said with a pout.

"I mean, yeah. But you would be too if something you always wanted is destroyed days after acquiring it."

"Anyway. Let's continue." Velvet said before motioning for me to continue.

"Right. After hearing that, Grady argued that Wolf was the only protection they had as they did not believe in guns. However, it would have swayed his mother had Grady not mentioned the werewolf again."

Story

"You wanna talk about werewolves? Fine. We'll talk about werewolves." She said, furious as she began to drag Wolf away to the nearby shed, where she proceeded to open the door. "Tomorrow, we'll talk about everything from werewolves to flying monkeys! But right now, we have to catch the rest of the deer and put this dog

where it can't get to the rest of them. Grady, it's time to get your priorities straight."

"Come here, boy." Grady said with Wolf escaping the mother's grip and running to him. "They are straight, mom!"

"GRADY! OPEN THIS DOOR!" The mother ordered after Grady closed the door and barricaded it.

"YOU'LL BE SAFE IN THERE, MOM! IT WON'T BE ABLE TO GET YOU!"

"GRADY! GRADY!"

"WOLF!" Grady shouted, looking for his dog. However, he didn't see him anywhere. "WHERE'D YOU GO, BOY!? WOLF!"

"AAAAHHHHHH!" Somebody screamed in the distance.

"Will? Wolf?" Grady asked, suddenly afraid again. Deciding to investigate further, he walked over to Will's house, hoping to find him or Wolf unharmed. "WILL?"

Not getting any response, Grady slowly climbed the porch that led to Will's front door. Opening the door, he peered inside and looked around but saw nothing due to the darkness.

"Will?" After stepping inside and closing the door behind him, Grady felt his nerves and anxiety levels rise to extreme levels. "Mrs. Blake?"

Real World

"Looks like the kitty got her name in a good book." Yang teased, causing Blake to roll her eyes.

"What's Grady and Will's last name?" Velvet asked.

"Tucker is Grady's last name, and Blake is Will's last name." I answered. "Anway, while Grady was exploring Will's house, Mrs. Tucker was banging on the door. Luckily, she would catch a break as a car pulled into the driveway."

Story

"GRADY? SOMEBODY? I'M IN HERE! HELP!" Mrs. Tucker shouted, hoping for someone to free her.

Unfortunately for her, Emily, who had just pulled up into the driveway, didn't hear her. And as a result, she went into the house, completely unaware of everything that had just happened. But as she went through the house, she became incredibly uneasy as all the lights were off, and nobody else seemed to be home.

And it wasn't much better for Grady as he continued exploring Will's house. As with each step he took, Grady became incredibly restless. All throughout the house, there were signs that something terrible had happened. The wallpaper seemed to be ripped off, with various parts of the walls missing, and the furniture was strewn across the floor. Licking his lips, Grady continued exploring the house.

Tucker's House

"Hello?" Emily asked as she entered the kitchen. But after receiving no answer, she became slightly worried and confused. Walking back over to the steps, Emily wondered where everyone had gone. "MOM? DAD?"

Placing her purse on the stairs' handrail, Emily went to the second floor to see if anyone was up there.

Will's House

"Will?" Grady asked as he looked inside what appeared to be a bedroom. Not getting a response, Grady went down the hall to check elsewhere for his friend. However, he noticed the numerous deer

trophies hanging on the wall as he walked down the hall. And had the deers his parents brought not escaped, Grady would have brushed it off as a coincidence. But because the deer did escape, he wondered if someone or something mounted them as trophies.

Tucker's House

Opening the door, Emily looked inside and saw no one there as well.

"Hello?" Emily asked as she continued to wonder where everyone was.

Will's House

Entering the living room, Grady looked over the couch and saw that something had torn it to shreds. Grady then walked over to the window and noticed the curtains were in bad shape with plenty of holes in them. However, because of this, the full moon's light entered the room unimpeded.

Tucker's House

"Where is everyone?" Emily asked, now fully scared.

Will's House

"It got Will." Grady said, thinking it was the Swamp Hermit who got Will.

Tucker's House

"Grady? Is this your idea of a joke?" Emily asked, thinking her brother was playing a prank on her. However, she became skeptical of that when she entered the basement.

Will's House

Worried for his friend, Grady began to think of a way to save Will from the Hermit. But he quickly remembered that he would need a

weapon to protect himself from the Swamp Hermit. Spotting a poker stick nearby, Grady picked it up and felt like it would make a decent makeshift weapon.

Tucker's House

Emily became almost frozen in fear when she heard a strange yet horrifying growl in the distance. Not wanting to stick around, she left the basement and headed back upstairs as fast as possible.

Will's House

Hearing the same growl but also figuring it was the Swamp Hermit, Grady immediately dashed out of the house. However, as he climbed down the porch, he became unsure of which direction the sound originated.

Ten Minutes Later

Climbing over the hill, Grady looked around in hopes of finding any clue as to where the Swamp Hermit took Will or where Wolf was.

"WILL?" Grady nervously asked as the moon shone behind him.

Tucker's House

"Grady?" Emily asked as she looked down the hall next to the stairs.

Grady

Kneeling, Grady slowly climbed down the hill while keeping the poker stick at the ready if something tried to attack him.

Tucker's House

As Emily walked to the living room, she felt her anxiety levels rise with each step she took. Hearing the floors creaking behind her, she turned around and heard an animal growling close by. Seeing the

nearby door was ajar, she opened it, entered the room, and saw something that made her soul leave her body.

It was a massive creature with horrifying teeth that growled at her.

"AAAHHH!" Emily screamed as she ran out of the room. Unfortunately, the creature chased her throughout the house. Luckily, she managed to escape for the moment by going downstairs and out the back door. However, it didn't last long as the creature easily forced the door open in seconds.

"LET ME OUT!" Mrs. Duncan shouted when she heard someone screaming nearby. Although, she did become surprised when Emily suddenly opened the door. But before she could leave or ask any questions, Emily closed the door and barricaded it.

"What is it?" Mrs. Tucker asked, afraid as the vicious growling continued on the other side of the door.

"Some kind of wolf." Emily answered, panting.

"AAAAHHHHH!" They bother screamed when the creature pushed against the door.

Knowing they had to escape, the mother and daughter began to look for a way out. However, that proved challenging as the sounds of the beast growling made it difficult to concentrate. And when it jumped onto the roof of the shed, they nearly lost it. Luckily, the mother had an idea as she went over to the wall and turned off the lights. For a moment, they thought it worked as the beast stopped growling. But the creature punching through the wall proved them wrong. Grabbing a nearby metal stick, the mother started hitting the creature's hand with it in an attempt to get it to leave.

Woods

"WOLF! WILL!" Grady shouted as he continued looking around for his friend and best friend. But it was proving challenging to see

anything beyond a certain range as the fog was unnaturally thick. Even the bright light of the full moon did little to illuminate the area. However, the lack of light and dense fog did little to deter Grady as he continued his search.

Tucker's House

Seeing that the creature had retracted its arm, Emily and her mother slowly moved away from the door while trying to remain as quiet as possible.

Woods

As Grady continued looking through the woods, he desperately hoped for some clue to appear that would tell him if he was on the right trail or not. Luckily, after being scared by some birds, a hint appeared in the form of wolfsbane wrapped around plants and sticks.

"WILL! IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, ANSWER!" Grady shouted at the top of his lungs. But all he got in response was animals groaning. "WOLF!"

After not getting an answer, Grady decided to keep going in what he hoped was the right direction. But upon hearing some twigs snapping behind him, he turned around and screamed when he saw a beast coming right at him. Not wasting any time, Grady ran as fast as possible to try and escape whatever was chasing him. However, after a couple of seconds, he remembered the traps the Swamp Hermit had set up around the swamp.

"The net." Grady said, trying to remember where one was. Hearing some rustling, Grady turned around and came face to face with the Swamp Hermit, who he thought was the werewolf.

"GOT HIM!" The Hermit declared while tightly holding onto Grady's shoulders. He then let go of Grady and went to check on the net that supposedly captured the werewolf.

"You got the werewolf." Grady said, amazed but still scared when they reached the net and saw something squirming inside.

"You. I've waited a long time for this." The Swamp Hermit growled before roughly grabbing the net. "YOU TOOK MY WIFE AND CHILDREN FROM ME! EVERYTHING I EVER LOVED! I SWORE ONE DAY I WOULD TAKE YOUR HEART THE WAY YOU TOOK MINE!

But the Hermit made a grim realization when he saw that it wasn't the werewolf but instead a deer.

"RUN, BOY!" He ordered, knowing the real werewolf was nearby.

"LOOK OUT!" Grady shouted when he saw the werewolf pounce on the Hermit.

And as much as he wanted to help him, Grady knew that it would be suicide to do so and decided to run instead. But the pained screams of the Hermit nearly made him break down in fear. However, another problem quickly arose that grabbed Grady's attention. And that was that he was lost while the werewolf knew the swamp like the back of his paw. Yet, before he could keep running, he fell to the ground when the werewolf came up from behind and pushed him.

But before Grady could try and escape, he became confused when the werewolf started howling in pain. And after seeing it become slightly darker, Grady looked to the sky and noticed that the lunar eclipse was finally happening. Grady turned back to the werewolf and saw the creature had fallen over in pain after spazzing out for a few moments.

Grady, now curious, got up and moved closer to the werewolf. But to his immense shock, the animalistic grunts of pain soon sounded human-like, with the werewolf itself appearing more humanoid. But once the werewolf managed to calm down enough, it looked toward Grady to reveal the face of Will.

"WILL!" Grady said, shocked.

GET AWAY!" Will shouted, worried for his friend as he didn't know for how much longer he would remain in control of his curse. "GET AWAY, GRADY!"

"YOU! You're the werewolf."

"I don't want to hurt you, but I can't help myself, Grady." Will said before letting out more pained grunts.

"There's got to be something we can do." Grady said, unaware that the lunar eclipse was about to end.

"NO. LEAVE! NOW! GO!" Will painfully ordered before letting out another excruciating shriek as he struggled to keep himself from turning and hurting his friend.

Unfortunately, he could do nothing as the lunar eclipse ended with Will forcibly turning back into a full werewolf. And once he was a full werewolf again, Will stood up and grabbed a foolish and terrified Grady by the shoulders. It then picked him up and began to terrorize him. Luckily, help quickly came in the form of Grady's dog, Wolf appearing and attacking Will. And because of the pain inflicted by Wolf, the werewolf dropped Grady and turned his attention to the dog. But before he could swipe at him, the dog bit down hard on the werewolf's arm.

However, the werewolf grew furious and swung his arms, causing Wolf to let go and whimper when he hit the ground. Yet, Wolf did not stay down for long and quickly got up, charged, and pounced on the werewolf. And the force of the impact sent the werewolf tumbling down the hill and into the bog's water.

Walking up to Wolf, Grady kneeled and petted his dog while watching what he once called a friend struggle to get out of the bog. Thankfully, it didn't last long as the bog's water dragged the werewolf under its water, where it proceeded to drown.

"Thanks, Wolf. Thanks, boy. Poor Will." Grady said before standing up. He then petted his dog before motioning for him to follow him home.

The Next Day

"Come on, you guys. You can finish that later." Mrs. Tucker said while birds happily chirped.

"Okay." Grady and Mr. Tucker said as they set down their paint brushes. They then went over to sit down at the table.

"So, you two start school tomorrow." Mrs. Tucker said as she handed Emily a bowl of food.

"Yep." Grady answered as he sat down and began filling his plate.

"I hope they have some normal boys- non-werewolf types." Emily added.

"I thought you liked the werewolf types."

"Now, listen, you two. We walked about this. We know that it was some kind of wolf that attacked you that night, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was a werewolf." Mr. Tucker said, annoyed.

"Except what I saw."

"And you haven't seen Will around, have you?" Emily added, causing both parents to go silent as they knew she got them there.

"There has to be some rational explanation." Mr. Tucker said, still not willing to accept the fact that werewolves exist.

"Anyway, it's over." Mrs. Tucker said, smiling and relieved that they were out of danger.

"And I know one thing. I was wrong about Wolf." Mr. Tucker said before giving Wolf some ham. "With my apologies."

"Honey, not at the table." Mrs. Tucker chided but smiled when her husband looked at her. Smiling, everyone sat back down and enjoyed their dinner.

Two Hours Later

"How's he doing?" Mr. Tucker whispered as he and his wife looked at their sleeping son.

"He seems okay."

"Oh, good. Maybe he's finally over those nightmares." Mr. Tucker said, causing his wife to let out a relied sigh. They then smiled before closing the door. But as soon as the door closed, a new werewolf jumped out from under the sheets. However, it was only a nightmare as Grady woke up in another cold sweat.

"It's only a dream. Only a dream." He told himself while panting. But as soon as he said this, he heard wolves howling in the distance. And in the bog where Will drowned, an unknown abject began to emerge from the murky waters. But as the wolves continued to howl, Grady got up and went over to his window, where he noticed that it was a full moon tonight.

Real World

"Then, as if called by an unknown force, Grady exited his room, walked down the stairs, and left his house. He then looked up at the full moon, and for reasons he didn't understand yet, he began howling, similar to how Will howled the last few nights. The End." I said as I closed the book. "How was it?"

"IT WAS AWESOME!" Ruby and Nora shouted.

"It was pretty good." Yang agreed.

"And an interesting twist to some old werewolf stories I heard when I was younger." Velvet added, slightly scared but still liked the story.

"And aside from some inconsistencies and weird coincidences, it was a good story." Blake said before adding. "But I am curious about what happens to Grady afterward."

"Up to you to decide." I answered.

"After hearing this story, I would like to imagine him learning to control his curse while his parents desperately try to find a cure." Cassie said.

"And try to make the most of it." Grady added.

"But what of the Hermit? Did he die?" Nora asked, curious.

"He survived. But that's only because the lunar eclipse started, causing Will to regain some control of his body." I answered.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

"Okay, Nora. The story's over. You can stop now." Yang said, annoyed as the howling sounded closer than it had been.

"Uh, that wasn't me." Nora said, causing everyone else to pale.

"Please tell me you're joking." Blake said, scared.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWHOO!

"I'm not." Nora said.

"I-I think we should resume going back to Beacon." Velvet suggested.

"Right." Ruby said, with the others agreeing. And in less than a second, they grabbed their stuff before dashing in the direction of Beacon. Once they were out of sight, I turned to Grady and smiled.

"I see you got control over your curse." I said, smiling as Grady took off his sweater and scarf to reveal that he was in his hybrid form.

"It took a while to learn I could do this on a full moon and even longer to actually be able to do this."

"How did you guys think of the story?"

"It was great and pretty close to what happened."

"And thanks for accepting my request of omitting me from the story." Cassie said.

You're welcome. But remind me again, why?" I asked.

"Personal reasons, but to put it simply, I didn't want more people to tease me for my interest in werewolves and other mythical creatures." She answered.

"Uh?" I asked, confused.

"People in the past have made assumptions about me or made fun of me because they saw my name in a book, movie, and show. And whatever the character did there, they assumed I did so as well."

"Makes sense." I said, thinking it over and how ruthless some people are. But before I could say anything further, Wolf pounced on me and brought me to the floor. "Hey, Wolf. How have you been?"

"He's been good and a joy to have around." Grady answered.

"Which reminds me." I said as I stood up. "Are you three still doing hunts together?"

"Yup."

"And the Grimm back there?"

"They came out of nowhere and tried to attack Wolf and me. Luckily, Grady came in full werewolf form and saved us." Cassie answered. Afterward, we stayed silent for the next couple of moments.

"How are your parents and the Hermit?"

"My parents are fine. They did get scared when they learned about the curse but allowed Grady and me to continue hanging out."

"And my parents are still trying to find a cure to my curse and a way to subdue some other evil creatures." Grady answered.

"Sadly, the hermit died last year due to old age."

"Well, hopefully, he is in heaven with the rest of his family." I said, sad. And after looking around, another question came to my mind. "But I am surprised at how fast Fever Swamp changed."

"We're surprised too. But it has had years to change and my parents' inventions to help." Grady said, reminding me that it was four years since the incident had happened.

"Yet, despite all the bad stuff that happened here, this place does give off a sense of comfort and nostalgia every time we come here." Cassie added.

"It sure does. Oh, by the way, I saw Lucy earlier. You know, the one who's a monster that eats other monsters."

"Really. Oh, wow. How's she doing?" Grady asked.

"She's doing good. She was on her way to advance her training." I answered.

"We should meet up again and see what we could do together."

"Are you sure you don't have a crush on her?" Cassie teased, causing Grady to blush and roll his eyes.

"Anyway. When are you coming back home, Jaune?" Grady asked.

"Soon as spring break is coming." I answered.

"Well, it's almost morning. So, you better head back to Beacon." Cassi said, pointing to the rising sun. But before I could say anything, Zwei barked as he did earlier when we escaped the House of No Return. His eyes glowed a bright yellow, with his pupils becoming black slits. He then dashed off in the direction my friends went.

"I think he is another Goosebumps creature." I said, worried.

"Wouldn't surprise me, considering the camera and what else we had seen." Grady said.

"True. Anyway, see you guys. It was nice seeing you three again. And tell everyone back home I said hi." I said as we shook hands.

"Will do. Take care, Jaune." Grady said, smiling.

"But don't forget to bring your girlfriend." Cassie said, smirking before they dashed off in another direction. I was confused about what she meant but decided to let it go and worry about it after returning to Beacon and taking a nap.

Notes:

The Next Chapter will be: Beware the Snowman with Weiss & Winter appearing.

Chapter 6

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Story Teller

Chapter 6: Beware, The Snowman

"IT'S SO HOT!" Ruby and Yang shouted.

"We know. You don't have to yell." Blake said, enjoying the slight breeze the desk fan gave her, even if it wasn't much.

We were currently in my team's dorm, trying our best to keep cool and beat the heat. It was a week since we met with Grady, the Werewolf of Fever Swamp. And because it was a weekday, we were supposed to have classes with Oobleck and Professor port and a few tests from Peach. However, Glynda canceled all classes and meetings due to the heat, as it was the hottest day Vale had ever experienced. Typically Vale temperatures average around twenty-seven degrees celsius. But today, the temperature was forty-four degrees celsius. As a result, because of these high temperatures, everyone sought a way to beat the heat. And with us were Nora, Ruby, Yang, Blake, Velvet, and Weiss. Pyrrha and Ren were still out but were due to return soon.

"How much longer is this heat wave supposed to last?" Velvet asked. Despite how hot it was, she was still sitting relatively close to me.

"The rest of the day." I answered after checking my scroll.

"Great." Yang said as she fanned herself with a makeshift fan.

"At least Ozpin canceled classes and all assignments until the heat wave ends." Ruby said, thankful for that as she had a few assignments that she still had to finish.

"Yeah, 'cause it's too hot to do anything, even read." Blake agreed as she downed another water bottle.

"What should we do in the meantime, then?" Yang asked.

"I don't know. It's too hot to think."

"Times like this make me wish I was back in Atlas, where it never reached these temperatures due to the near-constant snow." Weiss said, remembering the cold temperatures of the Atlas Kingdom.

"But if it got too cold?" Nora asked, curious.

"It rarely gets that cold in general. But when it does, we typically get some warm drinks and stay inside."

"That sounds nice." Velvet said, moving closer to me and blushing for some reason.

"Maybe when it's not face-melting hot." Blake countered.

"Ugh. I wish we were back in Patch. They have some of the best ice creams in all of Vale." Ruby said.

"Too bad we're stuck here in Beacon." Yang said.

"An ice cream does sound good about now." Weiss agreed.

"But we don't have any on hand." Nora reminded.

"And it would be too hot to make some. That is if we had the ingredients." Velvet added.

"Well, while we don't have the ingredients to make some, we could go out and get some." I suggested.

"Really funny, Arc. While getting the ice cream sounds wonderful, I don't want to stand around in the blazing sun with the ice cream making a sticky mess." Weiss said. She would have also tossed me a glare but didn't have the energy to do so.

"I know it's too hot to stand outside and eat the ice cream. But the place I know of allows us to eat inside the store, which is massive, and the owners keep it at a cool twenty-two degrees Celsius." I clarified.

"What's the name of this place that sounds like heaven?" Yang asked.

"And where is it?" Blake asked.

"The name of the place is called Amber's Glacies Crepito. And it's located in Downtown Vale."

"What kinds of ice cream do they sell?" Nora asked.

"Almost every flavor imaginable and some experimental ones. I think I even remember seeing them serve some pancake ice cream."

"PANCAKE ICE CREAM!" Nora shouted, jumping to her feet. Knowing what she was supposed to do, the rest of us stood up. But I made sure to grab my book as I wanted to write down another story. "LET'S GO!"

"NORA! WAIT UP!" The others shouted when Nora grabbed my hand and dragged me to the bullheads.

One Hour Later

"JAUNE! So good to see you again." The owner, Azure, an older lady, said smiling.

"Good to see you too, Azure." I said as we entered the store.

"Are these you friends?"

"From Beacon, yes."

"Well, then, they are friends of the store. What can I get everyone?"

"DO YOU GUYS REALLY HAVE PANCAKE ICE CREAM?" Nora excitedly asked.

"Yes, we do. What kind would you like?"

"What flavors do you have?"

"We have buttermilk pancake ice cream, banana pancake ice cream. Cinnamon pancake ice cream, and butter pecan pancake ice cream."

"Cinnamon pancake ice cream."

"Alright. And what about the rest of you?"

"Do you have taiyaki?" Blake asked.

"Yes, we do."

"Then, I'll have one, please."

"Alright, how about you, little red riding hood?" Azure asked, causing Ruby to pout.

"I'll have a strawberry and cookies ice cream if you have one."

"Two scoops or three?"

"Th-"

"Two. She'll have two." Yang interjected, knowing that Ruby didn't need that much sugar.

"Alright. And what will you have?"

"Stout Chocolate Pretzel Crunch."

"Excellent choice." Azure said, smirking before turning to Weiss. "And what will you have?"

"I will have a frutti di bosco gelato. Thank you."

"Great choice, as we just received a fresh shipment of fruits." Azure said before turning to Velvet and me. "And what will the couple have?"

"Uh." I began, unsure of how to respond.

"We're not a couple." Velvet said, sounding sad. And I could have sworn I heard her say, 'not yet, at least.' "Anyway, I'll have a carrot ice cream. Two scoops, please."

"Okay. And what about you, Jaune? I'm guessing the same." Azure said, smirking.

"Yes. But only one scoop."

"Got you. Okay. One cinnamon pancake ice cream. One taiyaki. One two-scoop strawberry and cookies ice cream. One stout chocolate pretzel crunch. One frutti di bosco gelato. One two-scoop carrot ice cream. And one one-scoop Pumpkin Pete's ice cream. I'll have your orders ready in about ten minutes." Azure said before heading into the kitchen.

"When did you out about this place, Jaune?" Nora asked as we sat down at a nearby table.

"I was about six or seven. My family used to come to Vale for various business reasons. And every time before we left for home, we came here as a treat." I answered.

"I'm glad you did, as this place feels like an oasis." Weiss said, glad to be out of the heat.

"It truly does." I agreed as I pulled out my book and a pen.

"Are you writing a new story?" Blake asked.

"Yes."

"Can you tell us what it's about?" Ruby asked.

"Nope."

"How about some hints?" Yang asked.

"Or simply the name?" Velvet added.

"Alright. I call this story: When the Ghost Dog Howls. It's about two kids who brought a fake hound's tooth necklace. But they soon discover that the tooth can grant wishes. However, little did they know that the tooth was haunted by the ghost of a huge hound. A ghost that's got a mouthful of sharp teeth—but wants this one back. How does that sound?"

"Sounds cool." Ruby answered.

"Sounds interesting." Velvet said.

"But I am curious as to who or what sells a fake hound's tooth necklace." Weiss said.

"You'll just have to wait and find out." I answered, causing her to roll her eyes.

"Um, Jaune." Velvet said, getting my attention.

"Yes?"

"I-I was wondering. If-" She began, but Azure cut her off.

"Order up." She said as she reached us while carrying a large tray.

"That was quick." Nora said with a mouthful of pancakes.

"Well, you can thank the new hires for that. Enjoy." Azure explained as she finished handing out our orders before leaving.

"Wow. This is good." Ruby said as she tried her ice cream.

"Indeed." Weiss agreed, surprised at the flavor and how good her ice cream tasted.

"So, Velvet. What were you saying?" I asked, turning to her.

"Uh, I was wondering if you could read us another story." She answered.

"Are you sure? I feel like you were asking-"

"I'm sure. I really want to hear another story." She cut me off, albeit a bit too quickly.

"Alright." I relented, not wanting to pressure her. I reached into my bag and pulled out the book. "What type of story do you want to hear?"

"Wait. Your published, Arc?" Weiss asked, surprised.

"No. This book is just various stories I wrote throughout my life."

"If you want, and if the stories are good, I could get in contact with some contacts I have and perhaps get you published. Again, if you want."

"Thanks, but no." I answered, surprising her.

"Your call. But anyway, do you have a story relating to the cold?"

"Yes. But you're going to have to be more specific as that's pretty broad."

"How about a monster story that revolves around the cold?" Yang suggested.

"But please don't tell us a story about the abominable snowman. I heard so many iterations about it that it's starting to get stale." Blake said.

"The abominable snowman?" Ruby asked, confused.

"The actual name of the snow creature that lives in snowy mountains. But most simply call it the yeti." Velvet explained.

"Oh, the yeti." Ruby said, realization dawning upon her. "Yeah, it's getting stale."

"Alright. There goes that story. Oh. I just remembered this other story." I said, rapidly flipping through the book to the correct page.

"What's it called?" Nora asked.

"It's called: Beware, The Snowman. With the tagline being: He's got a heart of cold."

"What's it about?" Blake asked.

"It's about this girl named Jaclyn who used to live with her aunt Great in a fictional place called Chicago. But not anymore. They moved to a place called Sherpia. It's a tiny village on the edge of the Arctic Circle. Jaclyn can't believe she's stuck out in Nowheresville. No movie theaters. No malls. No nothing. Plus, there's something really odd about the village. At night there are strange howling noises. And in front of every house, there's a snowman. A creepy snowman with a red scarf. A deep scar on his face. And a really evil smile. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like a good story to have while we enjoy our ice cream." Yang answered, with the others agreeing.

"But what is the Arctic Circle, or is it fictional like the Chicago place?" Weiss asked, curious.

"It's fictional."

"Can you describe it a bit so we have a better image of the place?" Blake asked.

"Think the most northern but still hospitable land of the Atlas Kingdom. And right on the edge of the Arctic Circle is a small village with enough supplies for everyone to survive relatively comfortably. As for the homes, think cozy, suburban homes resembling cabins in the woods."

"Why would they move there?" Ruby asked, curious.

"Pay attention, and you'll find out." I answered before clearing my throat. "When the snows blow wild. And the day grows old. Beware, the snowman, my child. Beware, the snowman. He brings the cold. Jaclyn wondered why this rhyme her mother told her suddenly came to mind."

Story

'Why did that rhyme return to me?' Jaclyn wondered.

It was a rhyme her mother used to whisper to her when she was younger. She could almost hear her mother's soft voice, which she hadn't heard since she was five...

Beware, the snowman.

He brings the cold.

Jaclyn's mother died when she was five, causing Jaclyn to move to live with her aunt Greta. Now, Jaclyn was twelve, and her aunt never read that rhyme to her. As Aunt Greta and Jaclyn climbed out of the van and gazed at their snow-covered new home, Jaclyn wondered why that rhyme returned to her.

"Jaclyn, you look troubled," Aunt Greta said, placing a hand on Jaclyn's shoulder. "What are you thinking about, dear?"

Jaclyn shivered, not from Aunt Greta's touch but from the chill of the steady wind blowing down the mountain. She then stared at the flat-roofed cabin that was to be their new home.

Beware, the snowman.

'That's the second verse to that rhyme.' Jaclyn thought, wondering why she couldn't remember it. *'Maybe we still have the old poetry book mom used to me.'*

"What a cozy little home." Aunt Greta said with her hand still on Jaclyn's shoulder. Yet, while Greta seemed happy, Jaclyn felt sad. But she forced a smile to her face.

"Yes. Cozy." Jaclyn murmured, noticing how snow clung to the windowsills and filled the cracks between the shingles while a mound of snow rested on the low, flat roof. She then looked toward her aunt and saw her usually pale cheeks were red from the cold. While Greta wasn't that old, she had white hair for as long as Jaclyn could remember. Greta wears it long and tied behind her head in a single braid that falls nearly all the way down her back. She is tall, skinny, pretty, and has a delicate round face with big, sad, dark eyes.

Jaclyn always wondered where she got her looks since she didn't resemble her aunt in the slightest. She has wavy, dark brown hair and brown eyes. Jaclyn is tall and athletic and was the star basketball player on the girl's team at her school back in Chicago. She doesn't remember her mother that well and never knew her father. When Jaclyn asked her aunt, Greta said he left soon after she was born. One thing Jaclyn always noticed that further confused her was her personality. While she loved talking, singing, and dancing, Greta could go for days and barely say anything. Jaclyn loved her aunt, but Greta was so stern and silent. She often wished it was easier to talk to her aunt.

'I'm going to need someone to talk to.' Jaclyn thought dejectedly.

Despite only leaving Chicago yesterday, she already missed her friends and wondered how she would make friends in this tiny village on the edge of the Arctic Circle. Letting out a sigh, Jaclyn helped her aunt with the bags from the van. As her boots crunched over the hard snow, she looked toward the snow-covered mountain. There

was so much snow that she could not tell where the mountain ended and the clouds began. Looking around, Jaclyn felt like the little square houses along the road weren't real. It seemed like they were gingerbread houses. It was as if she had stepped into some kind of fairy tale. Except it wasn't a fairy tale. It was her life, her totally weird life.

Jaclyn still wonders why she and her aunt moved from the United States to this tiny, frozen mountain village. Greta never explained and only ever muttered, "Time for a change" or "Time to move on." It was difficult for Jaclyn to get her aunt to say more than a few words at once. She knew her aunt and mother grew up in a village like this one. But why did they have to move here now? Why did she have to leave her school and all of her friends?

'Sherpia.' Jaclyn wondered. *'What kind of a name is Sherpia? Can you imagine moving from Chicago to Sherpia? Lucky, huh? No way.'*

It isn't even a skiing town. The whole village is practically empty! Jaclyn wondered if she could find someone her age. But before she could dwell on the thoughts, the sound of Greta kicking the snow away from the front door of their new house drew her attention. Greta tried to open the door but struggled to do so.

"The wood is warped." She grunted before lowering her should to the door and forcing it open. Greta might be thin, but she's tough. Jaclyn started to carry the bags into their house, but something standing in the snowy yard across the road caught her eye. Curious, she turned and stared at it and gasped as it came into focus. It was a snowman. A snowman with a scar. And as she squinted across the road from it, the snowman started to move.

Jaclyn blinked a few times before looking at the snowman and seeing that it wasn't moving. The only thing that was moving was the red scarf fluttering in the swirling breeze. And as Jaclyn moved to examine the snowman more carefully, her boots loudly crunched in the hard snow.

'What a weird snowman.' Jaclyn thought. And she was right. The snowman had slender tree limbs for arms, with one arm poking to the side while the other stood straight up as if it was waving to her. Each tree limb had three twig fingers poking out from it. For its face, the snowman had two dark, round stones for eyes, a crooked carrot nose, and a down-turned, sneering mouth of smaller pebbles. Yet, Jaclyn couldn't stop looking at the scar. It was long and deep and cut down the right side of the snowman's face. *'Why did they make it so mean-looking?'*

Real World

"Yeah. Why would they make it a snowman mean-looking?" Ruby asked.

"And why a scar?" Velvet added.

"Yeah. Snowmen are supposed to be happy and smiling like Frosty." Nora agreed.

"You'll find out." I said, remembering the experience my friend had in Sherpia before finding where I had left off. "After examining the snowman, Jaclyn said it was weird-looking, and nothing about it seemed normal. But she then remembered that her aunt always told her that weird was Jaclyn's favorite word. However, Jaclyn would argue that no other word adequately describes the sneering snowman with a scar on its face.

Story

"Jaclyn! Come help! " Aunt Greta shouted, getting Jaclyn's attention and making her turn back to her home.

Casting one last glance at the snowman, Jaclyn ran back across the road to her new home to help unpack the van. It took a long time to unpack everything. And when they lugged the final carton into the cabin, Aunt Greta found a pot, which used to make them some hot chocolate on the little, old-fashioned stove in the kitchen.

"Cozy." Greta repeated a few times while smiling. Yet her gaze remained fixated on Jaclyn's face as if trying to determine if she was unhappy. After a moment, Greta wrapped her bony fingers around the handle of the white hot chocolate mug. Her cheeks were still red from the outside cold. "At least it's warm in here."

Jaclyn nodded sullenly, wanting to cheer herself up, but she couldn't. She kept thinking about her friends back home, wondering if they were going to a Bulls game tonight. Like herself, her friends were all into basketball. Unfortunately, she won't be playing much basketball here.

'Even if the people here play basketball, there probably aren't enough kids in the village for a team!' Jaclyn thought.

"You'll be warm up there." Aunt Greta said, snapping Jaclyn from her thoughts. She pointed up to the low ceiling. The house had only one bedroom, which was Greta's room. Jaclyn's room was in the low attic beneath the roof.

"I'm going to check it out." Jaclyn said, standing up with her chair scraping on the hardwood floor.

The only way to reach the room was by using a metal ladder that rested against the wall. Climbing the ladder, Jaclyn pushed the flat board in the ceiling away before pulling herself into the low attic. Greta had picked the right word as it was cozy. However, the ceiling was so low Jaclyn couldn't stand up. Crouching, Jaclyn made her way to the only window in the room as pale, white light went through it. While snow speckled the windowpane, she could still make out the road and the two rows of little houses curving up the mountainside. Yet, she didn't see a single soul out there.

'I'll bet they've all gone to Florida.' Jaclyn thought. It was midwinter break, and the school here was closed. Aunt Greta and Jaclyn had passed it on their way through the village. It was a small, gray stone building, not much bigger than a two-car garage. But as Jaclyn looked through the window, she wondered how many kids would be

in her class. Only a handful or will it just be her? Would they even speak English? The thoughts made Jaclyn swallow hard. But she scolded herself for being so downtrodden. *'Cheer up, Jaclyn. Sherpia is a beautiful little village. You might meet some really neat kids here.'*

Real World

"Hopefully, she does meet some good friends." Ruby said. "Like you and me, Jaune."

"Yeah, moving can be tough, and making new friends even tougher." Yang agreed.

"Especially if they're not friendly to outsiders or people with unique traits." Blake sadly said but let out a small smile when Yang placed her hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. She will." I assured.

Story

Sighing, Jaclyn returned to the ladder. She decided that she was going to cover the ceiling of her room with posters. While it would remain bleak and cold, the posters would brighten the room. And perhaps it could cheer Jaclyn up as well.

"Can I help unpack?" Jaclyn asked as she climbed down the ladder.

"No. I want to work in the kitchen first. Why don't you take a walk or something? Do a little exploring." Greta suggested after pushing her long, white braid off her shoulder. A few minutes later, Jaclyn found herself outside, pulling the drawstrings of her parka hood tight. She adjusted her fur-lined gloves and waited for her eyes to adjust to the white glare of the snow.

'Which way should I walk?' Jaclyn wondered.

Jaclyn had already seen the school, the general store, a small church, and the post office down the road. After a few minutes, she decided to head up the road toward the mountaintop. But as Jaclyn walked, she noticed how hard and crusty the snow was. Her boots hardly made a dent in it as she leaned into the wind. Spotting some twin ruts that a truck probably made as it drove through the village, Jaclyn decided to walk in one of them to make traveling easier.

As she continued to walk, Jaclyn passed a couple of houses that were about the same size as hers. They both appeared dark and empty. One of them was a tall stone house with a Jeep in the driveway. There was a kid's sled in the front yard next to an old-fashioned wooden sled. Inside the house, a yellow-eyed, black cat stared out at Jaclyn from the living room window. Jaclyn raised her hand to wave at the cat, but it didn't move. At this point, Jaclyn realized she hadn't seen any other humans. And as she continued to climb, the wind whistled louder, and the temperature dropped. The road grew steeper as it curved, with the house now farther apart.

'It's so pretty.' Jaclyn thought, seeing the snow sparkle as the clouds rolled away from the sun. It was beautiful. She then turned to gaze at the house she passed and noticed how they looked like little gingerbread houses nestled in the snow. Jaclyn even thought that she would like Sherpia in time. However, Jaclyn let out a cry when she felt icy fingers wrap around her neck. "Ohh!"

Spinning around to free herself from the icy grip, Jaclyn came face-to-face with a grinning boy wearing a brown sheep skin jacket and a red-and-green wool ski cap.

"Did I scare you?" He asked with his grin growing wider. But before Jaclyn could answer, a girl about her age stepped out from behind a broad evergreen bush. She was wearing a purple down coat and purple gloves.

"Don't mind, Eli." She said, tossing her hair off her face. "He's a total creep."

"Thanks for the compliment," Eli grinned. After seeing their interactions, Jaclyn decided they must be brother and sister. They both had round faces, straight black hair, and bright, sky-blue eyes. Eli then turned to Jaclyn and squinted at her. "You're new."

"Eli thinks it's funny to scare any new kids." The girl explained, rolling her eyes. "My little brother is a riot, isn't he?"

"Being scared is about all there is to do in Sherpia." Eli said with his grin fading.

'What a weird thing to say.' Jaclyn thought. Deciding it would be best to introduce herself, Jaclyn did so. "I'm Jaclyn DeForest,"

"I'm Rolonda Browning, and this is my brother Eli Browning." Rolonda introduced before pointing to a nearby white house. "We live there."

"Where do you live?" Eli asked.

"Farther down." Jaclyn answered, pointing down the road. She was about to ask them something else but stopped when she noticed the snowman they were building. It had one arm out and one arm up, a red scarf wrapped under its head, and a deep scar cut down the right side of its face. "That s-snowman. It looks just like one I saw across the street from me."

"Really?" Eli muttered as he lowered his eyes to the snow while Rolonda's smile faded.

"Why did you make it like that? It's so strange looking. Why did you put that scar on its face?" Jaclyn demanded. Eli and Rolonda glanced at each other tensely and didn't reply. But after a few moments, Rolonda finally shrugged.

"I really don't know." She murmured, blushing.

'Is she lying? Why didn't she want to answer me?' Jaclyn wondered.

"Where are you walking?" Eli asked, tightening the snowman's red scarf.

"Just walking." Jaclyn answered. "Do you guys want to come with me? I thought I'd walk up to the top of the mountain."

"No!" Eli gasped with his blue eyes widening in fear.

"You can't!" Rolonda cried. "You can't!"

"Excuse me?" Jaclyn gaped, shocked. She wondered what their problem was. "Why can't I go up to the top?"

Real World

"Okay. This is getting interesting." Yang said, leaning forward while she continued to eat her ice cream.

"I'm still curious as to why they would make a snowman like that." Ruby said.

"Perhaps it's because they are bored. They did say there wasn't much to do in Sherpia. And when you are this bored, you tend to do things out of the ordinary to pass the time. After all, I did so when I was back at Atlas." Weiss suggested.

"True." Nora agreed.

"But it's obvious they are hiding something. But what?" Blake asked.

"Well, if we let Jaune continue, we'll find out." Velvet said before motioning for me to continue.

"Right, Anyway. After a moment, Jaclyn saw the fear in their eyes quickly fade away. Rolonda tossed back her black hair while Eli pretended to be busy with the snowman's red scarf."

Story

"You can't go because it's closed for repairs," Eli finally explained.

"Ha, ha. Remind me to laugh later." Rolonda sneered.

"So, what's the real reason?" Jaclyn demanded.

"Uh ... well ... we just never go up there, "Rolonda stammered, glancing at her brother. She waited for him to add anything, but he didn't. Seeing that he wasn't going to help, Rolonda continued while avoiding looking at Jaclyn. "It's kind of like a tradition, I mean ... well ... just don't go up there."

"It's too cold," Eli added. "That's why. It's just too cold up there for humans to survive. You would turn to ice in thirty seconds."

Yet, Jaclyn knew he was lying, as that wasn't the real reason. However, she decided to drop the subject as they suddenly seemed tense and worried.

"Where are you from?" Rolonda asked while digging her gloved hands deeper into her coat pockets. "The next village?"

"No. Chicago." Jaclyn answered. "We lived in an apartment right on the lake."

"And you moved here?" Eli cried. "From Chicago to Sherpia? Why?"

"Good question." Jaclyn muttered, rolling her eyes. "I live with my aunt, and she decided to move here. So..."

Jaclyn was unable to keep the sadness from her voice. They talked for the next few moments, with Jaclyn learning that Rolonda and Eli lived in Sherpia their entire lives.

"It isn't so bad. You get used to not seeing many people." Rolonda said.

"And it's nice if you like snow. Lots and lots of snow." Eli added, causing everyone to laugh.

"Alright. See you guys later." Jaclyn said before walking up the road.

"You're not going to the top-are you?" Eli called, sounding frightened.

"No." Jaclyn called back while pulling her hood tight. "It's getting kind of windy. I'll just go a little farther."

As Jaclyn headed continued forward, the road curved higher. Soon she crunched her way past a wide, woodsy lot filled with pine trees nearly as thin as pencils. Looking around, Jaclyn noticed that the trees were tilted at all angles, with none of them standing up straight. She then saw animal tracks not too far from her.

'Racoon or squirrel? No, too big. Deer tracks? I can't tell.' Jaclyn wondered as she examined the tracks. Standing, Jaclyn raised her eyes and cried out in surprise when she saw another sneering snowman staring back at her with its twisted carrot nose and coal-black eyes. Its red scarf fluttered in the strong wind. Jaclyn stared at the long scar cut deep on its face as its twig arms waved in the wind as if greeting her.

"Why do they build these creepy snowmen?" Turning around, Jaclyn saw another snowman in the front yard across the street. Same tree-branch arms. Same red scarf and the same scar.

'It must be some kind of village decoration.' Jaclyn thought. *'But why didn't Rolonda and Eli want to tell me about it?'*

Heavy gray clouds rolled over the sun. The snowman's shadow appeared to stretch until it swept over me. Suddenly, Jaclyn felt a sudden chill going down her back, causing her to step back. Looking at the sky, she saw that it was quickly turning evening dark. Turning back to the mountain top, Jaclyn saw clumps of pine trees hide the top from view.

'Should I head back or keep going?' She wondered. Jaclyn then remembered the fear on Eli's face and Rolonada's cry when she said she was climbing to the top. But that only made her more curious.

'What were they afraid of? What was up there?'

Letting her curiosity get the better of her, Jaclyn decided to keep going to the mountain top. She soon saw a can in the next driveway buried under a thick sheet of snow. It looked as if it hadn't been driven all winter. Following the road, as it curved away from the houses, Jaclyn noticed that the snow had become deeper and softer. Her boots deeply sank as she walked. She felt as if she was walking on another unexplored planet.

The road became steeper after a few seconds, with large white rocks jutting out from the snow. Clumps of slender pine trees still tilted in every direction. Jaclyn realized there were no houses up this high, with only trees and snow-covered shrubs in sight. Jaclyn rubbed her cheeks and nose to warm them as the road curved again while the wind whistled. Leaning into the wind, she continued trekking forward. Soon Jaclyn stopped when a small log cabin came into view. Although, she had to shield her eyes with a gloved hand to see it.

'A cabin way up here?' Jaclyn thought, shocked. *'Why would anyone want to live this high up, away from everyone?'*

The cabin stood in a square, cleared-out area, surrounded by scraggly, tilting pine trees. Jaclyn saw no car, sled, or boot prints in the snow. Creeping closer to the cabin, she saw that the windows were steamed over. Jaclyn couldn't tell if the lights were on or not. But as she made her way closer, she felt her heart pounding. Leaning her arms on a windowsill, Jaclyn pressed her not against the glass but couldn't see inside.

"Anyone home?" She called. But all she got was silence. The only sound was the wind whistling around the corner of the cabin. Knocking on the door, Jaclyn tried again but got no reply. "Weird."

Jaclyn tried to open the door but failed. She then decided to push gently. Something told her she shouldn't have, but she did so anyway. The door slid open with a rush of warm air hitting her.

"Anyone home?" Peeking beyond the door, Jaclyn noticed that it was pitch-black inside. "Hello?"

Stepping inside, Jaclyn decided to take a quick look. She noticed that snow had been so bright outside that she had to take a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dim light. But before she could focus, a large white blur leaped onto her while growling. Its hot breath was on her face as it snarled.

Real World

"That's what she gets for trespassing." Weiss said.

"Who would someone choose to live in such a remote area of an already remote area?" Ruby asked.

"Yeah. I can't imagine living in such a lonely place." Yang agreed.

"Well, some people prefer the solitude." Blake answered.

"And others want to do something in peace or just be left alone." Velvet added. "Or they could be a hermit."

"What's a hermit?" Nora asked, curious. Ice cream and pancakes remain covering her face.

"Someone who lives alone due to religious reasons." I answered. "Anyway, back to the story. As the creature continued to snarl at Jaclyn, a voice suddenly ordered it to cease. The creature moved away with the voice saying down Wolfbane."

Story

Gasping for breath, Jaclyn wiped the hot saliva off her face. Then, she realized she was staring at a white-furred wolf. The wolf was breathing hard with its jaws open, tongue snaking down nearly to the cabin floor. Its head lowered as if preparing to attack again with its round, dark brown eyes locked on her suspiciously.

"Down, Wolfbane. It's okay, boy." The voice ordered. Jaclyn rolled away from the panting creature and climbed to her knees. Two hands reached down, grabbed her hands, and tugged Jaclyn to her feet. Looking up, Jaclyn noticed that the person was a man with round, silver-gray eyes. He was tall, thin, and dressed in denim. "Are you okay?"

"Is that... really a wolf? "Jaclyn asked, sweat rolling down her forehead. The man nodded, his expression stern, his eerie eyes not moving or blinking.

"He won't hurt you. Wolfbane is well trained." The man assured.

"But he-"

"You startled us." The man explained, still not blinking nor not looking away. He then motioned to the doorway in the back wall. "We were in the back room."

"Sorry." Jaclyn murmured. "I didn't know anyone was in here. I thought-"

"Who are you? "The man angrily demanded as his silvery eyes narrowed at her. And behind the bushy white beard, his slender face reddened."

"I didn't mean to."

"Who are you?"

"I was taking a walk." Jaclyn struggled to explain as her heart was pounding, and her mouth wasn't so dry. The white wolf uttered a low as it stood tensely, head lowered, eyes locked on her, almost as if waiting for a command to attack.

"Why did you break into my house?" The man demanded, taking a step toward Jaclyn. She realized at that moment that he was dangerous, but something was off about him.

"I didn't break in. I just-"

"You broke into my house. Don't you realize how dangerous that is? Wolfbane is trained to attack strangers."

"S-sorry!"

The man took another step toward Jaclyn. He still hadn't blinked those weird, round eyes. Jaclyn's chest tightened in fright.

'What did he plan to do?' Jaclyn wondered but did not want to find out. Taking a deep breath, she spun around and attempted to run out the door. Behind her, the door slammed hard against the cabin. Glancing back, Jaclyn saw the man burst through the cabin and run after her.

"Where are you going?" He cried. "Hey-stop! Where are you going?"

"Up to the top!" Jaclyn shouted while pointing to the mountain top.

"No, you're not!" He furiously shouted back. "You will not go up there!"

'He's crazy.' Jaclyn realized. He has no right to shout at her like that! She can go anywhere she wants! He's crazy. It had started to snow with large wet flakes, blowing hard in swirls of wind. Jaclyn brushed off a snowflake from her forehead before running to the road. But to her horror, the bearded man continued to chase after her, half-walking, half-running over the deep snow.

"Beware, the snowman!" He warned.

"Huh?" Jaclyn turned back to face him. "What did you say?"

The old rhyme flew through Jaclyn's mind for the second time that day …

When the snows blow wild, And the day grows old. Beware, the snowman, my child. Beware, the snowman. He brings the cold.

'I don't believe this!' Jaclyn thought. She hadn't thought about that rhyme since she was five. And now it has run through her mind twice in one day!

We stood staring at each other from opposite sides of the road. Jaclyn saw the man shiver and noticed he wore only a denim work shit. Big Snowflakes clung to his hair and shoulders.

"What did you say?" Jaclyn asked.

"The snowman lives in the ice cave." He shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth to be heard over the wind.

"Huh? A snowman?" Jaclyn asked. 'He's really nuts! Why am I standing here listening to him? The man lives in a cabin on a mountaintop all by himself except for a white wolf! And now he's yelling insane things about a snowman!'

"Beware, the snowman!" He repeated. "You cannot go up to the top! You cannot!"

"Why not?" Jaclyn demanded, her voice coming out higher and shriller than intended.

"You do not want to meet the snowman!" The man answered. The big snowflakes covered his beard with his silvery eyes glowing eerily. "If you meet the snowman. You will never return!"

'He's totally nuts. That's why he lives all alone up here.' Jaclyn realized. Knowing she had stayed too long, Jaclyn spun around and ran away, slipping and sliding through the deep snow. Cold snowflakes hit her face with her heart pounding. She was panting as she ran down the curving mountain road. But after a few seconds, she heard something breathing hard. 'Was that me breathing so hard? Were those my thudding footsteps?'

Glancing back, Jaclyn saw the white wolf chasing her, which was gaining fast. Its teeth bared and head lowered to attack.

"Noooo!" Jaclyn wailed. The big snowflakes stung her eyes as she ran. She soon began to stumble as the ground tilted. It felt as if she was trapped in one of those glass balls that snow inside when you shake them. After a few seconds, Jaclyn tumbled downhill, with the whole mountainside appearing to quiver and shake.

'The road! Where was the road?' Jaclyn wondered as she lost it while tumbling in the snow. But that did not stop her. She got up and kept running with the steady thud of the wolf's heavy paws in her ears. Glancing back, Jaclyn saw it gaining on her, moving rhythmically, easily over the snowdrifts. Its teeth bared, and puffs of steam rose from its open mouth. But because she looked back, she didn't see the smooth rocks jutting up along the side of the road.

"Ohhhh!" Jaclyn screamed in pain as she landed hard on her stomach in the deep snow. She gasped for breath as the fall knocked the wind out of her.

Scrambling to her knees, Jaclyn watched helplessly as the white wolf closed approached her. But to her surprise, it stopped a few feet away. It lowered its head and stared, breathing hard. Beneath the thick, white fur, its chest heaved up and down. Snowflakes melted on its tongue. Staring at it in fear, Jaclyn pushed herself to her feet, brushed her hair back, and brushed snow off the front of her parka.

"Go home, boy." Jaclyn whispered, worried it might attack her. Her voice barely carried over the wind and snow. "Go home."

She started to back but was too afraid to take her eyes off it. One step and then another. The wolf watched her but didn't move. Jaclyn's boots soon crunched onto the road, filling her with relief as she found the road again.

'Yes! I had found the road!' She thought as she backed up. The wolf stood taller, lowered its tail, and tensed its back. Its brown eyes followed her. But when Jaclyn saw its eyes, she realized they appeared vaguely human. She then began to wonder what it was thinking and why it chased after her. Was it just making sure that she

went down the mountain? Did the strange man send it to keep her from heading to the mountaintop? Taking another step back and then another, Jaclyn saw that the wolf remained in place and did not move. Soon, she was out of the creature's sight.

"Whew!" Jaclyn uttered a sigh of relief. She then turned around and continued walking toward the village and her new home. But she glanced back every few seconds to ensure the wolf did not follow her.

The snow had started to come down hard now. Jaclyn pulled her parka over her hair and held it with both her hands as she began to trot along the road. She wondered if Aunt Greta would be worried about her as she had been gone a lot longer than she had planned. Looking toward the sky, she noticed it had become nearly black as night. Soon she started to pass houses on both sides of the road. She could even make out the light in some of them. One even had a blazing fire going in a fireplace. Black smoke curled up from the chimney. Jaclyn passed one of the strange, scar-faced snowmen and saw its tree limbs trembling in the wind. It almost appeared as if it was waving at her. Feeling the anxiety in her growing, Jaclyn broke into a run. But each time she rounded a curve, she came face to face with another snowman.

'I hate this village!' She thought. 'It's too weird. Too weird! I'm never going to be happy here. Never! Why did Aunt Greta bring us here?'

A thudding sound behind her snapped Jaclyn from her unhappy thoughts. She then realized someone was following her. For a moment, she wondered if it was the wolf but dismissed it as it sounded different. They sounded almost like human footsteps. Jaclyn then realized that the crazy breaded man had followed her.

"Ohhh!" Jaclyn said, scared. Taking a deep breath, she spun around to face him. However, to her surprise, it was Rolanda, not the crazy man or his dog. And as Jaclyn stared at Rolanda, she realized that Rolanda had jogged across the road to her with snowflakes dotting her black hair.

"Jaclyn. Hi! You ran right past our house." She said, panting while pointing to her yard. Jaclyn glanced over Rolanda's shoulder and saw her brother, Eli, waving to her from their driveway. "Didn't you see us?"

"No. I... uh... the snow was falling so hard, and..."

"Are you okay? " Rolonda asked.

"Well ... " Jaclyn hesitated, unsure of what to say. "A white wolf and a crazy man chased me. He has a cabin near the top. "

"You ran into Conrad?" Rolonda said, shocked.

"Huh? Conrad?" Jaclyn asked, confused as the wind blew her hood off. "Is that his name?"

"Yes. He has a cabin that he built himself. And he keeps a white wolf named Wolfbane. I meant to warn you before, Jaclyn - "

"Warn me?"

"Yeah, to stay away from him. He and that animal he keeps - they're both really strange. "

"Tell me about it!" Jaclyn groaned while rolling her eyes. "Is that why you and Eli never go up to the mountaintop "

"Well ... it's one of the reasons." Rolanda answered, lowering her eyes.

Jaclyn waited for Roland to continue, but she didn't. She continued to stare at the snow while kicking a few clumps of it around. Eli stood behind Rolanda, watching them with his hands in his coat pockets.

"Well, why does Conrad live up there so far away from everyone?"

"No one knows for sure." Rolanda said after a moment of hesitation. "He — maybe he works for the snowman. I mean..."

"Excuse me?" Jaclyn cried, unsure if she heard Rolanda correctly. "What did you say, Rolonda? He works for the snowman. What do you mean? What does that mean?"

But Rolanda didn't answered. She instead glanced back to her brother as if worried about something.

"Come on, Rolonda. What do you mean? What do you mean he works for the snowman?" Jaclyn insisted.

"I've got to go inside. It's almost dinner time." Rolanda said after brushing the snowflakes from her hair and taking a step back.

"But first, you have to explain." Jaclyn demanded, following Rolanda.

"I can't." Rolanda whispered. "Because of Eli. He's too frightened."

"But, Rolonda- " Jaclyn began, noticing Eli watching them from the driveway.

"Go home." Rolonda snapped. "Just go home, Jaclyn."

"Not until you tell me what you meant."

"Okay. Okay." Rolanda whispered, glancing toward Eli. "Meet me tomorrow night, okay? Meet me tomorrow night at the church - and I'll tell you everything."

Real World

"Wow. Talk about being stubborn." Yang said.

"Yeah." Ruby agreed.

"And it seems like she might blow her only chance at making friends with the only two kids in Sherpia." Velvet said.

"Speaking of which, I wonder why the hermit is living in the mountains and how everyone knows that rhyme." Nora said.

"Hopefully, Jaclyn knows the old proverb about wanting to know too much, and some things are better left unknown." Blake said.

"So what happens next, Jaune?" Weiss asked.

"After Rolanda agreed to tell Jaclyn everything, Jaclyn ran back to her house. But instead of gently opening the door, she burst into her home, causing her aunt Greta to spin around quickly." I resumed.

Story

"Is it snowing? " Greta asked.

"The biggest flakes I ever saw." Jaclyn answered while nodding furiously, snowflakes falling from her hair.

"I've been so busy in here; I didn't even look out the window." Aunt Greta said, upset. Jaclyn took off her coat and was about to hang it up but saw there were no hangers in the closet yet. So she tossed her parka on top of a stack of cartons. Jaclyn then walked into the kitchen while rubbing the sleeves of her sweater.

"Aunt Greta, do you know anything about a snowman? " Jaclyn asked, causing Greta to let out a gasp. But when she turned around, Jaclyn noticed that Greta's face was blank.

"Snowman?"

"Do you know anything about a snowman on top of the mountain?"

"No. No, I don't, Jaclyn. " Greta's voice trembled as she bit her lip.

'Why did she look so tense?' Jaclyn wondered as Greta bent down to pull more mugs from the carton. Jaclyn then moved across the room to help Greta unpack the mugs.

"Someone told me I shouldn't go to the top of the mountain because of a snowman. A snowman who lives up there." But Greta didn't say anything in response. All she did was hand Jaclyn two mugs for her

to store, which she did. "This man told me that if I met the snowman up there, I would never return."

"Village supersttion." Greta muttered after letting out a short, dry laugh. However, Jaclyn was unconvinced as she squinted at her aunt.

"Really?"

"Of course. These tiny villages all have their scary stories. Someone was just having fun, giving you a little scare."

"Fun? I don't think so." Jaclyn said in disbelief. That weird, white-bearded guy, Conrad, had screamed at Jaclyn that she shouldn't go up to the mountaintop. Jaclyn knew he wasn't joking and that he was dead serious. It was almost as if he was threatening her to stay away. "Aunt Greta, do you remember a rhyme about a snowman?"

"Rhyme?" She asked, stretching while pushing her hands against her back.

"I remembered a rhyme today. From when I was little. It just popped into my head."

"I don't think I remember any rhyme." She said, chewing her lip while avoiding Jaclyn's eyes.

"I only remember the first verse." Jaclyn said before reciting the rhyme.

When the snows blow wild

And the day grows old,

Beware, the snowman, my child.

Beware, the snowman. He brings the cold.

When Jaclyn finished, she looked up to find the strangest expression on Aunt Greta's face. Her eyes were watery, her chin trembled, and her cheeks were paler than usual.

"Aunt Greta, are you okay?" Jaclyn asked, worried. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Greta replied sharply, turning to look away from her niece. She began nervously fiddling with her long, white braid. "Nothing at all, Jaclyn. But I don't remember that rhyme. I don't think I've ever heard it before. "

"Are you sure?" I asked timidly.

"Of course, I'm sure." Greta snapped. "Now, come on. Help me finish up here so I can begin dinner."

'What is wrong?' Jaclyn wondered. *'Why is she suddenly angry at me? And why do I have the feeling that she isn't telling the truth? Aunt Greta has never lied to me before. Why is she acting so strange now?'*

Real World

"Wait. How old is Jaclyn, Jaune?" Yang asked.

"She's twelve." I answered.

"Oh, okay. I was about to say how she didn't see that her aunt was clearly lying."

"Yeah. But since she is twelve, we can let that go as it's understandable." Weiss said.

'Try telling that to the rest of my hometown. You would be laughed at for thinking you can spot these things easily, like the Cuckoo Clock of Doom or that Magic Mirror.' I thought, slightly annoyed. "After finishing helping her aunt with unpacking their belongings, Jaclyn went to her room to try and sleep. But she couldn't. For some

reason, her bed felt hard, and the low ceiling was sinking, dropping down to her."

Story

As Jaclyn shuddered underneath her blankets, the snow clouds drifted away, the half moon appeared low in the sky, and the moonlight flowed into her room, casting shadows all over. It was all so new and strange to her that she wondered if she would ever be able to sleep in the attic. Jaclyn closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep by thinking of nice, soothing thoughts. Soon, her thoughts turned to her friends in Chicago, calling up their faces. She wondered what they were doing while she had a frightening adventure on the mountain.

'I wondered if they missed me.' Jaclyn thought, feeling sleepy. But before it could take her, the sounds of something howling woke Jaclyn up. *'Wolf howls?'*

Climbing out of her bed, Jaclyn went over to the window. Down below, the moonlight made the snow sparkle almost as brightly as during the day. The bushes trembled in the soft breeze while the wind carried another frightening howl. Jaclyn looked toward the mountain but could only see the dark and silent houses along the silvery road that curved its way to the top.

Jaclyn's whole body tingled. She knew she couldn't fall asleep. It was chilly in her room, and the air felt heavy and damp. Seeing as she wouldn't get any sleep, Jaclyn decided to take a walk, hoping it would help her relax. Grabbing a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, she put them on before creeping downstairs, trying not to wake up her aunt. She quickly found her parks and boots and put them on as well. Stepping out into the night, Jaclyn silently closed the front door while her eyes swept over the glittering snow of the small front yard. Jaclyn then made her way to the road, her breath streaming up in whisps of fog.

"Wow!" Jaclyn murmured, surprised at how good the cold, fresh air felt against her face. The wind had stopped with the whole world seemingly gone still and silent. Jaclyn then realized there were no cars, no buses, no horns honking, and no people laughing or shouting on the street.

"I'm all alone out here. The whole world is mine." Jaclyn whispered, enjoying the sensations. However, a long, frightening howl brought her out of her crazy thoughts. Jaclyn shivered while raising her eyes to the mountain top and wondered, *'was the white wolf howling up there? Did it howl like that every night? Why did it sound so human?'*

Taking a deep breath of the cold air, Jaclyn held it in and began walking along the road. Her boots crunched on the hard, crusty snow. She kept walking, passing a few houses, and only stopped when a shadow slid over her path.

Jaclyn gasped, initially thinking someone was following her. But then she realized she was staring at a long shadow of a snowman. The shadow tilted over the road. The tree branch arms, one raised, one out to the side, appeared long and menacing. Shaking her head, Jaclyn stepped over the shadow and crossed the street. But another shadow fell over her.

Like the previous time, this shadow belonged to another snowman, an identical snowman. The shadows of the strange snowmen fell over each other. Jaclyn suddenly felt as if she was walking in a black-and-white world of shadowy heads, fluttering scarves, and sticklike arms-all saluting, all waving.

'Why were there so many of them? Why did the people in this village build them all alike?' Jaclyn wondered. But another howl made her raise her eyes from the crisscrossing shadows over the snow. This time the howl sounded closer, but it also sounded human, causing a chill to go down Jaclyn's spine. Her heart now pumping, Jaclyn turned around. *'Time to head home.'*

Real World

"Hey, Weiss?" Ruby said, snapping me from the book.

"Yes?" She asked.

"How many animals howl?"

"That would depend."

"On what?"

"If you're talking about howling in general, then too many to count. But if you're talking about at night, then only a couple. Most are canines, with some felines and primates. Why?"

"I was just wondering if Jaclyn was hearing an animal howling."

"Whose to say it's even an animal? Or even something 'normal?'" I interjected, remembering the scarecrows and haunted mask. "Anyway. Back to the story. The howl had really frightened Jaclyn. She started walking as fast as possible, swinging her arms as she walked while leaning into the gusting wind."

Story

After a few minutes, Jaclyn stopped when she noticed the scar-faced snowman in the driveway up ahead. She gasped when it nodded its head toward her.

"Noooo!" A low cry escaped Jaclyn's lips.

It nodded. The snowman nodded! Then its head rolled to the ground and cracked apart with a soft thud. But a moment later, Jaclyn realized it was only the wind causing the snowman's head to nod and fall off the body.

'What am I doing out here? It's late, and it's cold. And it's weird.' Jaclyn thought as some kind of creature was howling its head off nearby. She then turned to the headless snowman. Its head was a shattered clump of white on the floor, while the scarf remained on top

of the body, fluttering in the cold gusts of wind. Feeling another shiver go through her, Jaclyn turned and ran home. She ran through the blue-black shadows of snowmen as her boots crunched over the shadows of their waving arms and scarred heads. There was a snowman in each yard, lining the street like night watchmen.

'This walk was a crazy idea.' Jaclyn thought, feeling her chest tighten. She wished to be home, back in the safety of her new home. A snowman waved its three-fingered limb at her and sneered its coal-dark sneer as she ran past them. As Jaclyn scrambled for home, the rhyme forced its way back into her mind...

When the snows blow wild

And the day grows old,

Beware, the snowman, my child.

Beware, the snowman. He brings the cold.

Jaclyn's house soon came into view down the road. She sucked in a deep breath and ran harder. The old rhyme had been haunting me ever since I arrived in the village. The old rhyme had followed Jaclyn from her childhood, following her to her new home.

'Why did I suddenly remember it today? What was it trying to tell me? Why had the cold words returned after being forgotten for so many years?' Jaclyn wondered. She had to find the rest of it. She needed to find the second verse of the poem. An eerie howl, rising like an ambulance siren, sounded so close to Jaclyn, causing her to spin around. She searched the road and the frozen yards but didn't see anyone. No wolf or human in sight. Another howl sounded even closer.

'Was someone following me?' Jaclyn wondered. She held her hands over her ears to keep out the frightening sounds, and she flew over the snow, flew the rest of the way home. Soon, she reached the narrow front door as another long howl sent a chill down my body.

'Closer. It's so close.' Jaclyn realized. Someone was following her. Grabbing the doorknob, she twisted and made a horrifying discovery.

She had locked herself out.

Real World

"And this is another reason why you should always keep your keys and scroll on you. So if you accidentally lock yourself out, you're not stuck outside." Weiss said.

"I don't recall you ever locking yourself out of the dorm." Blake said.

"Oh. I wasn't talking about myself."

"Who then?" Ruby asked.

"Winter. My sister. She locked herself out of the house or wherever we are staying many times."

"Anyway. As Jaclyn wondered how she was going to get inside her house, she heard another frightening howl. This time it was so close. It seemed like it was coming from the side of her home. Her whole body trembled, panic tightening around her throat. She stumbled back from the front door."

Story

But as Jaclyn moved back, she noticed the front window - the only window on this side of the house was open a crack. Snow streaked the windowpanes and clumped on the narrow sill. Jaclyn stared at the tiny opening at the window bottom, took a deep breath, and hurtled herself to the window. Grabbing the frame, Jaclyn uttered a groan and pushed it open with all her might. And to her surprise, it slid up easily.

Jaclyn pushed the window all the way up, grabbed the sill with both hands, and hoisted herself up as another howl rang through the night air.

'So close. So close and frightening.' Jaclyn thought as she tumbled headfirst into the house and landed hard on her hands and knees on the wooden floor. With a gasp, she scrambled to her feet, grabbed the window, and closed it.

Afterward, Jaclyn stood there, leaning against the wall, waiting to catch her breath. But she wondered if she had awakened Greta. No. The house stood dark and silent. The only sound she could hear was her rapid, shallow breathing. Another howl, distant this time. But Jaclyn was more focused on something else. Was it only her imagination that she was being followed? Were the terrifying howls rolling down from the mountaintop carried by the wind?

Still breathing hard, Jaclyn stepped away from the front wall and slowly made her way through the darkness to the little backroom, where they had poled all of the packing cartons. Her books were still in one of the cartons. Jaclyn was sure she had packed the old poetry book her Mom used to read to her.

As the white moonlight flooded in from the window, Jaclyn found the book carton on top of a stack and pulled it to the floor. Her hands were trembling as she struggled to pull off the heavy packing tape and open the box.

'I have to find that poem. I have to read the second verse of that rhyme.' She told herself.

Jaclyn tugged open the carton and began pulling out books. She had packed a bunch of paperbacks on the top. Underneath them, she found some textbooks and anthologies she had used at school. But as she pulled them out and stacked them carefully on the floor, she heard a cough followed by a footstep.

'Someone else is in here!' Jaclyn realized. "Aunt Greta? Is that you?"

But the voice that replied wasn't Aunt Greta's.

"What are you doing?" A strange voice demanded in a raspy whisper as the lights flashed on. Jaclyn blinked before swallowing hard when she stared up at aunt Greta.

"You frightened me, Jaclyn!" She croaked as Jaclyn jumped to her feet, waiting for her heart to stop pounding.

"You frightened me, too!" Jaclyn replied. "What happened to your voice?"

"I've lost it. Horrible sore throat. It must be the cold. I'm not used to the cold of this village yet." She rasped, rubbing her pale throat. Her straight, white hair hung loose behind her. She tugged it off the collar of her flannel nightshirt, brushing out tangles with one hand. "What are you doing, Jaclyn? Why are you down here in the middle of the night?"

"That old poem. I want to find it. I can't remember the second verse. I -"

"We'll unpack the books tomorrow." Greta yawned, suddenly appearing so thin and frail. "I'm so tired. And my throat hurts so badly. Let's try to get some sleep."

"I'm sorry." Jaclyn said, following Greta from the room. "I didn't mean to wake you up. I couldn't sleep, so ... "

"YOU WENT OUT!" Greta cried, spinning to face Jaclyn after she spotted the parka on the floor. Jaclyn could see the alarm and fear on Greta's face.

"Well ... yes. I thought maybe a short walk ... "

"You shouldn't go out in the middle of the night." Greta scolded before rubbing her sore throat as her eyes narrowed on Jaclyn.

"Sorry. What's the big deal, anyway? What's so terrible about going out at night ?" Greta hesitated, chewing her lower lip the way she

always does when she's thinking hard.

"It's just dangerous. That's all." She whispered. "What if you fell in the snow or something? What if you broke your leg? There is no one outside to help you."

"I'd roll home!" Jaclyn joked but stopped when Greta didn't join.

Real World

"Of course, it's not a joke. The Grimm could have gotten her." Ruby said, momentarily forgetting it was a story.

"Are there Grimm in the story, Jaune?" Nora asked.

"No. But Ruby is technically right in a sense. Other wild animals could have attacked her, and there would be no one around to help her." I answered, mentally stopping myself from remembering some not-so-pleasant memories of the Barking Ghost; my sisters encountered a while ago. "Anyway. After seeing her aunt's somber expression, Jaclyn wondered what Greta was keeping a secret. Did it have to do with the howls, or possibly, did she know the truth behind the mountain and Conrad? Perhaps it was the village superstition about the snowmen."

Story

'What's bothering you, Greta?' Jaclyn wondered with a yawn. But she was too sleepy to think about it anymore. Jaclyn put her arm around Greta's slender shoulders and walked her across the hall to her room. "Sorry I woke you. Good night."

Jaclyn then went to the ladder and climbed into her room. Yawning, she pulled off her jeans and sweatshirt and tossed them on the floor. She then jumped into bed and pulled the quilt up to her chin. Thankfully, there were no howls outside, or any sounds at all, for that matter. Shutting her eyes, Jaclyn snuggled into her soft pillow with her new bed still feeling hard. But she was too tired to care. Yet

before she could drift off to sleep, whispered words floated into the room.

"Beware, the snowman, Jaclyn... Beware, the snowman..."

"Huh? Who's there?" Jaclyn choked out as she sat straight up. She stared across the room at the window, the unfamiliar shapes of her furniture appearing silvery, ghostlike in the white moonlight.

"Beware, the snowman... Jaclyn, Beware the snowman."

Who are you? How do you know my name?" Jaclyn cried. Sitting up in the strange bed, she grabbed the quilt's end, gripped it tightly in both hands, and squeezed it. And she listened, but there was only silence now. Jaclyn asked again in a tiny and shrill voice. "Who are you? Who are you?"

Silence ...

Jaclyn didn't know how long she sat there, waiting for a reply, but after a while, she somehow drifted off to sleep. The following day, Jaclyn told Aunt Greta about the whispered warning. Greta took a sip of her coffee before reaching across the table, squeezing Jaclyn's hand, and replying.

"I had bad dreams, too, last night." She said, still whispering because of her sore throat.

"Dream? Do you think it was a dream?" Jaclyn asked. Greta nodded and took another long sip of her coffee.

"Of course."

Afterward, Jaclyn spent the entire day helping her aunt unpack the cartons and arrange their new house. She searched every carton for the poetry book but couldn't find it. Jaclyn didn't realize how much stuff they had brought from their apartment in Chicago. Their new

home was so small that it was a real struggle to find a place for everything.

As they worked, Jaclyn found herself thinking about Rolonda. She had promised to let her in at the little village church after dinner. Rolanda said she would tell her the truth about the snowman tonight. The truth... Jaclyn pictured Rolanda's brother Eli's frightened expression as he stood in the snowy driveway, watching them. And she remembered how scared they became when she told them she was walking to the mountaintop.

So much fear here in this village. Was it all because of silly superstitions?

After Jaclyn washed and dried the dinner dishes, she pulled on her parka and boots and prepared to meet Rolonda. She told Greta the truth. She was meeting a village girl her age that she met during her walk.

"It's snowing really hard." Greta whispered. "Don't stay out late, Jaclyn."

Jaclyn promised her aunt that she'd be home before nine. She then pulled up her hood, tugged on her gloves, and stepped outside.

'Does it snow here every day?' Jaclyn wondered, shaking her head. She might have always liked snow, but this was too much.

The snow came down hard, in sheets driven by a strong wind. Jaclyn lowered her head and trudged down the road toward the church. Snowflakes blew into her face and stung her eyes, making it difficult for her to see.

'What a blizzard! I wondered if Rolonda would show up.' Jaclyn wondered. The little stone church wasn't far from Jaclyn's house and was across from the post office. However, the piling snow made it appear miles away. Keeping her head down, Jaclyn stepped into a deep drift. The cold snow seeped into her boot and soaked her

socks. She let out a shuddering groan at this. "Ohhh. I'm going to freeze!"

There was no one around to hear her cries. There was nothing. After a bit, Jaclyn passed a brightly lit house, but she couldn't see anyone inside. The snow blew against her face and coat as if trying to push her back. It was almost as if it was trying to make her turn around.

"This is crazy. Crazy. No way Rolonda will meet me tonight." Jaclyn murmured. Squinting into the gray evening light, she saw the church's steeple, white against the falling snow. "I hope it's open."

Ducking her head, Jaclyn ran across the road - and thudded into something hard and icy. Evil black eyes glared into hers, causing Jaclyn to scream.

"Jaclyn. What's wrong?" A voice asked after hands jerked Jaclyn away. Her scream caught in her throat as she stumbled back, her boots slipping in the slick, wet snow. Turning around, Jaclyn saw Rolanda tugging on her coat sleeve. "I saw you run right into that snowman. "But why did you scream?"

"I - I-I - I just freaked." Jaclyn sputtered as she squinted at the snowman's dark eyes and the scar on its face. She then scolded herself for acting so stupid. *'Now Rolonda must think I'm a real jerk.* What is wrong with me, anyway? *Screaming because I bumped into a snowman!'* "Why did someone build a snowman like that in front of the church?"

"Are you okay?" She asked, her dark eyes peering into Jaclyn's eyes.

"Yeah. Fine. Let's get out of this snow." Jaclyn took one last glance at the sneering snowman before following Rolonda to a wooden door and stamped the snow off our boots on a straw mat on the side of the small church.

"Does it ever stop snowing here? " Jaclyn grumbled, pulling back her hood and unzipping her parka.

"Sure. It stopped once for ten minutes. We all took a summer vacation!" Rolonda joked as she took out her long, black hair.

Glancing around, Jaclyn noticed they were in some kind of waiting room that had a wooden bench on the back wall. Two lights shaped like old-fashioned gas lamps hung on the wall beside the bench, giving off a soft glow. They dropped their coats to the side and sat down. Jaclyn rubbed her hands, trying to warm them as her cheeks burned.

"It's nice and warm in here." Rolonda said, keeping her voice low. " The pastor keeps the heat up really high. He doesn't like to be cold."

" Who does?" Jaclyn murmured, rubbing her ears, trying to return some feeling to them.

" It's a nice, quiet place to talk. Especially about things that are ... kind of scary. "

"Scary? " Jaclyn asked, curious. Rolanda glanced around the small, white-walled room. For some reason, she suddenly seemed tense and uncomfortable. "Did your aunt tell you anything about the village? Anything about the history of the village?"

"No." Jaclyn said, leaning closer to Rolanda as she was whispering so softly. She wondered why Rolanda was so nervous since they were the only ones in the entire church. "Not a thing. I really don't think Aunt Greta knows much about this village at all ."

"Then why did you move here?" Rolonda demanded.

"Beats me. Aunt Greta never explained. She said it was time for us to leave Chicago." Jaclyn answered, shrugging. Rolonda leaned forward tensely and brought her face close to Jaclyn's face.

"I'll tell you the story." She whispered. "The history of this village is very strange. People don't talk about it much."

"Why not?"

"Because it's so frightening. My brother, Eli, is terrified all the time. That's why I met you here at the church. He doesn't like for me to talk about any of this. He doesn't like for me to talk about the snowman."

"Snowman? " Jaclyn asked, curious. "What about the snowman?"

Rolanda shifted her weight, with the wooden bench groaning in protest. She took a deep breath before beginning.

"Years ago, two sorcerers lived in this village. One was a man, and the other was a woman. Everyone knew they were sorcerers but left them alone.

"Were they evil sorcerers?" Jaclyn interrupted with Rolonda shaking her head.

"No. I don't think they were evil. At least, I don't think they were." She said before glancing around the room. Jaclyn leaned back against the bench, waiting impatiently for Rolanda to continue.

"One day, the two sorcerers were fooling around, having fun. They cast a spell on a snowman. And the snowman came to life."

"Really?" Jaclyn asked, shocked.

"Please, don't interrupt, Jaclyn. Please let me tell the whole story first." Rolanda said, narrowing her eyes at Jaclyn.

"Sorry." Rolanda leaned closer to Jaclyn before continuing in a whisper.

"The sorcerers used their magic to bring the snowman to life. But then they lost control of it. The snowman was powerful, and it was

evil. The sorcerers had given it life. But they didn't know what they were doing. And they didn't know that the snowman would try to destroy the village and everyone in it. The sorcerers tried to use magic to put the snowman back to sleep, but they weren't powerful enough. The villagers all gathered together and somehow managed to force the snowman up to the top of the mountain. There is a big cave at the very top of the mountain. The cave is cut in ice, and everyone calls it the ice cave. The villagers chased the evil snowman there. Then most people moved away from the village as no one wanted to remain in place with an evil snowman. The two sorcerers probably left, too. No one really knows what happened to them. And that's when Conrad comes into the story."

"Conrad? The weird guy with the white beard?" Jaclyn asked with Rolonda nodding.

"After the evil snowman was chased into the ice cave, Conrad moved up there. He built a cabin just beneath the ice cave. No one knew why."

"Is Conrad trying to protect the town? Does he work for the snowman? Does he help the snowman? Or does he think living so close to the evil snowman will keep him safe?" Jaclyn asked.

"No one knows. Conrad very seldom comes down from the mountaintop. And when he does come into the village, he doesn't talk to anyone. No one knows for sure who he is or why he stays up there. No one has anything to do with Conrad. We don't know if he's crazy or evil." Rolonda sighed. Once again, her eyes darted around the room. She seemed so nervous, as if she didn't want anyone else to know that she was telling me about the village's history. "Some nights, we can hear the snowman up there on top of the mountain. Some nights we can hear him roaring and bellowing with rage. Some nights, we can hear him howling, howling like a wolf. We've all built snowmen that look like him. Everyone in the village builds them."

"So that's why I see those weird snowmen everywhere!" Jaclyn shouted. Rolonda raised a finger to her lips before motioning for

Jaclyn to sit back down.

" Why do you build the snowmen?" Jaclyn asked as she sat back down. "Why is there one in just about every single yard?"

"To honor him." Rolonda answered.

"Huh? Honor him?" Jaclyn asked, shocked and confused.

"You know what I mean. People hope that if the evil snowman comes down from the ice cave, he'll see the little snowmen that look like him. It will make him happy and keep him from doing any harm." Rolonda said sharply before squeezing Jaclyn's hand. Rolonda's dark eyes burned into Jaclyn's eyes. "Now, do you understand? Now, do you understand why we're all so afraid?"

Jaclyn stared at Rolonda for a moment before laughing.

Real World

"Wow. Talk about a dick move." Velvet said, surprising everyone as we had never heard her say something like that before.

"Uh. Yeah." Yang said, still shocked but snapped out of it a second later. "Rolonda just told Jaclyn the village's history when she was clearly scared beyond belief."

"She could have just stayed home or done anything else. Something she loved to do. But she chose to tell her, but Jaclyn laughed." Blake seethed.

"Yeah. I was hoping for Jaclyn to make some friends, but now I'm hoping the snowman captures her." Ruby said.

"Same here." Weiss added.

"What happens next, Jaune?" Nora asked.

"After Rolonda finished, Jaclyn laughed. She thought Rolonda was a smart girl but didn't think she would believe a story like that. For a moment, she thought it a was a joke the villages told to scare newcomers. But Jaclyn stopped laughing when she noticed the startled expression on Rolonda's face."

Story

"Hey, come on. You're kidding - right?" Jaclyn asked. Rolonda shook her head solemnly with her dark eyes glowing in the dim light. "You don't really believe that a snowman can walk, do you? You don't really believe that a snowman can be alive!"

"I believe it." Rolonda said in a low, trembling voice. " It's not a joke, Jaclyn. I believe it. And everyone in the village believes it."

"But have you ever seen it?" Jaclyn asked, shifting her weight. "Have you ever seen the snowman walk?"

"Well ... no. But I've heard him late at night, Jaclyn. I've heard his howls and his angry cries. " She said before climbing to her feet. "I won't go close enough to see him. I'm too afraid. I won't go up to the ice cave. No one will ."

"But, Rolonda- " Jaclyn started but stopped when she noticed how Rolonda's chin trembled and how much fear was in her eyes. Just talking about the snowman frightened her. Jaclyn wanted to tell her that the story couldn't be true and sounded like a silly superstition. A fairy tale. However, she didn't want to insult her further.

'She might be my only friend here.' Jaclyn thought.

Jaclyn stood up and put on her coat. The two of them then exited the church. Luckily, the snow had stopped, but the gusting wind blew down from the mountain, causing the snow to swirl and dance around their boots. Jaclyn pulled her hood over her hair and lowered her head into the wind.

'No way I could ever believe such a wild story.' Jaclyn thought.

'Why doesn't Rolonda see how crazy it is?'

They made their way up the road, their boots sinking into the powdery, fresh snow. However, both of them were silent as their voices wouldn't carry over the loud rush of the wind. Jaclyn walked with Rolonda until they reached her home and stopped at the bottom of her snow-covered driveway.

"Thanks for telling me about the snowman." Jaclyn said.

"You had to be told." Rolonda said solemnly, locking her eyes onto Jaclyn's eyes. "You've got to believe me, Jaclyn. It's true. All of it. "

But Jaclyn didn't say anything. She simply said "Good Night" before turning and walking to her home. She was nearly there when she heard a sound over the roaring wind. A heavy THUD THUD THUD was coming up rapidly behind me.

Hearing the thuds, Jaclyn froze. For a moment, she thought it was her imagination. She pictured an enormous, evil snowman, as tall as a house, lumbering after her.

"No!" Jaclyn murmured before spinning around and seeing Rolonda's brother, Eli, running up to her. His heavy workboots thudded over the snow. His sheepskin coat was open, flapping out as he ran. "Eli-it's late! What are you doing out here?"

But he didn't reply. Breathing hard, his chest heaving up and down under his sweater, he eyed me suspiciously.

"She told you, didn't she?" He asked.

"Huh?" Jaclyn asked as they moved behind a tree to be out of the wind. "Eli, what is your problem?"

"Rolonda told you, didn't she? She told you about the snowman. " He repeated, pointing toward the mountaintop.

"Well... yeah." Jaclyn answered, brushing away a clump of snow that landed on her parka. But she then noticed something. "Eli, are you crazy? It's freezing out here! Zip up your coat."

"Rolonda doesn't know one thing." Eli said, ignoring Jaclyn. "She doesn't know that I saw it. I saw the snowman. "

"You saw the snowman? You saw the living snowman!" Jaclyn asked with Eli nodding.

"Yes. I saw him. But that's not the scary part."

"Eli. What is the scary part?"

Eli stared at Jaclyn with the wind ruffling his dark hair. But his eyes remained steady and hard.

"What is the scary part?" Jacyln repeated.

"The scary part is that the snowman saw me!" Eli answered. Feeling the wind howling around the tree, Jaclyn dragged Eli to the side of the nearest house and pressed themselves against the well. Shivering, he finally zipped up his coat.

"Eli, the story is crazy." Jaclyn insisted. "I really don't think-"

"Just let me tell you what happened. Then you can decide if it's crazy or not." He pleaded, shivering again. "It saw me, Jaclyn. The snowman stared at me. It knows who I am. It knows that I saw it. And that's why I'm so afraid of it. "

"But, Eli- " Eli raised a gloved hand to silence Jaclyn.

"Wait. Please." Eli said before taking a deep breath. "It happened a few weeks ago. My two friends and I climbed up the mountain. We wanted to see the ice cave. So we sneaked around Conrad's cabin."

"I don't get it. What does Conrad have to do with it?" Jaclyn asked, confused.

"He won't let anyone near the ice cave. He keeps everyone away. Conrad is so weird. Some people think he works for the snowman. He protects the snowman by keeping everyone from the village away."

"But you sneaked past Conrad ?"

"Yeah. My friends and I. And we climbed up close to the ice cave. I had never seen the cave before."

"What does it look like?"

"It's a huge cave cut into the side of the mountain. It's made of ice, all smooth and shiny. It looks like glass. The cave entrance is wide and totally black. And it has huge icicles hanging down all along the front with points as sharp as knives." Eli answered while making a sweeping motion with both his hands, outlining the shape of the cave for Jaclyn.

"Wow. It sounds kind of pretty."

"Yeah. In a way." Eli agreed. "But we didn't think it was pretty when the snowman came out."

"You really saw a snowman walking?" Jaclyn asked, staring at Eli hard.

"We heard a rumbling sound. The ground started to shake. My friends and I were scared. We thought it was an avalanche or something. My friends started to run down the mountain. But I stayed, and I saw it. The snowman poked his head out of the cave. He was as big as a grizzly bear, and he had a scar cut deep into his face. His eyes searched around for a bit before stopping on me. He then opened his mouth and let out an angry roar." Eli stopped and took a deep breath before starting again. "The snowman stepped out of the cave. The ground shook as snow blew all over the place. The snowman stared at me. And he roared again. I took off. I ran past

Conrad's cabin and all the way down the mountain. And I never looked back."

"What about your friends?"

"They were waiting for me down at the bottom. We just went to our houses and never talked about it."

"Why not?"

"Too afraid, I guess. We never talked about it. We never mentioned it. I never even told Rolonda. It was just too frightening to talk about." Eli then raised his eyes to match Jaclyn's eyes. "But now I have dreams. Bad dreams about the snowman. Every night."

Jaclyn stared at him, unsure of what to say. She noticed his whole body was trembling.

'From the cold? Or from being so afraid?' Jaclyn wondered. Eli gazed back at her, waiting for her to say something. "Eli, you didn't tell Rolonda about this. Why are you telling me?"

"So you will believe the story." He answered solemnly. " You're new, Jaclyn. You probably think it's all silly. But you have to stay away from the ice cave."

"But, Eli- "

"You didn't believe my sister - did you!" He accused. "You didn't believe her story."

"Well..."

"That's why I waited for you. I waited to tell you my story. Do you believe me, Jaclyn? Do you believe that I saw the snowman?"

"I-I don't know." The wind swirled around the wall of the house. Jaclyn touched her nose and cheeks and felt they were numb. "I've got to get home."

"Jaclyn, don't go up to the ice cave. Please, believe my story. It's true." Eli begged, grabbing Jaclyn's parka sleeve.

"Go home, Eli. Go home before you freeze." Jaclyn said, pulling her arm away before jogging toward her home. She always felt good while running and not thinking about anything. Jogging on fresh, powdery snow was difficult. Her boots kept slipping on the slick, hard surface underneath. By the time Jaclyn reached her home, her legs were aching.

Breathing hard, Jaclyn pushed open the front door, and to her surprise, the house was totally dark. She pulled off a glove and squinted at my wristwatch. It was only nine o'clock.

'Did Aunt Greta go to bed so early?' Jaclyn wondered since Greta usually stays up until at least midnight. Turning on the ceiling light and glancing around the small living room, Jaclyn noticed an open magazine on the couch. And aside from that, nothing else was out of place.

Leaning against the front door, Jaclyn pulled off her wet boots and stood them in the corner. Then she tugged off her parka and dropped it onto the couch. After a moment, her eyes stopped at the door to Aunt Greta's bedroom. The door stood open with darkness beyond the door. Worried, Jaclyn ran across the room and peeked into Greta's room.

"Aunt Greta?" Jaclyn called softly but got no response. She stepped into the room. "Aunt Greta? Are you in here?"

Jaclyn fumbled with the lamp on the dresser and managed to click it on after a few seconds.

"Aunt Greta?" Looking around the room, Jaclyn saw no trace of her aunt. Thinking she was in another part of the house, Jaclyn exited the room and called out loudly. "Aunt Greta, are you home? Ohh!"

Feeling her feet wet, Jaclyn looked down and noticed that she had stepped in something. Her sock was soaked. But as she lowered her gaze to the bedroom floor, Jaclyn saw a wide puddle of cold water.

"How did that get there?" Jaclyn murmured, worried. She then ran back to the living room. "Aunt Greta? Aunt Greta? Where are you?"

Real World

"Talk about karma." Yang said.

"Hopefully, the aunt is okay." Velvet said.

"Hopefully. But I'm curious as to why the snowman grabbed the aunt and not Eli." Blake said.

"After seeing the puddle and not getting a response from her aunt, panic started washing over Jaclyn. She wondered where her aunt was. She was about to run to the kitchen when she heard rattling at the front door. Jaclyn thought someone was trying to break in."

Story

As sweat ran down Jaclyn's face, she waited for the door to open. However, to her relief, it was her aunt bustling in, brushing the snow off her coat. Once Greta finished, she turned and smiled when she saw Jaclyn. However, her smile instantly died when she saw Jaclyn's expression.

"Jaclyn. What's wrong?" Greta asked

"I-I-I-Aunt Greta, where were you? I got so scared." Jaclyn sputtered while Greta took off her coat.

"Didn't you see my note?"

"Huh? Note?"

"I left it for you on the refrigerator. I met a nice couple this morning at the general store. They came by and invited me over for dessert and coffee."

"Oh. That's nice." Jaclyn choked out, her heart still pounding in her chest.

"Why did you get scared?" Greta asked, hanging her coat in the front closet. She then straightened her long, white braid behind her sweater.

"Well, I was in your room, looking for you. And I stepped in a cold puddle on the floor."

"Puddle? Show me." Greta demanded. Nodding, Jaclyn led Greta to the bedroom and pointed to the wide wet spot on the floor.

"Maybe the roof leaks." Greta murmured, gazing up at the ceiling. "We'll have to examine it tomorrow morning."

"I-I thought it was the snowman. I know it's crazy, but I thought he had been here. I thought he'd broken into the house and- " Jaclyn began but stopped when she saw the shock on my aunt's face. Her mouth dropped open, and she uttered a silent gasp.

"Jaclyn. What are you talking about? What have your friends been telling you? More nonsense about a snowman?"

"Yes. Rolonda and Eli, the two village kids I met. They both told me a crazy story about a living snowman who stays in an ice cave at the top of the mountain. They said-"

"It's all superstition."

"It's all old tales that have been handed down. None of it is true. You're smart enough to know that, Jaclyn."

"Yes. But Rolonda and Eli seem so frightened. They really believe the story. And Eli begged me not to go up to the ice cave."

"Probably good advice." Aunt Greta said, crossing the room to place a hand tenderly on Jaclyn's shoulder. "You probably shouldn't go up to the mountaintop, dear."

"Why not?"

"There must be some kind of real danger up there. Not a living snowman. But something else dangerous. That's how these old stories get started. Something bad happened on the mountaintop. Then the story changed each time it was told. Years later, no one remembers what really happened. And now everyone believes a crazy story about a living snowman."

"Have you seen all the strange snowmen in this village? All the snowmen with scars on their faces and red scarves? Don't you think they're spooky?"

"It's a strange village tradition. Very quaint. I think they're very interesting looking."

"Interesting?"

"Well, make me a promise." Greta said, yawning.

"Promise?"

"Promise me you won't go running up to the mountaintop to explore the ice cave. It probably is a very dangerous place. "

"Well..."

"Promise." Greta urged sternly.

"Okay. I promise." Jaclyn said, rolling her eyes. Yet, not even a few moments later, Jaclyn decided to go back on her promise. As she lay in her bed, she kept her eyes tightly shut, listening to the strange howls from the mountaintop. Jaclyn wondered if they were human or animals. She hated mysteries and always wanted to know the

answer to things. *'I'm going up there. I don't care what I promised my aunt. I'm climbing up to the ice cave. Tomorrow.'*

Real World

"Reminds me of Yang." Ruby said with Yang rolling her eyes.

"How so?" Weiss asked with a smirk.

"A few years before coming to Beacon, she got into trouble for staying out late. Dad grounded her for three weeks. But she was so curious about what some older kids were doing that she snuck out to find out. Only to get more than she bargained for, and dad had to save her. Once he brought her back, he gave her the grounding of a lifetime. Her grounding only ended a week before coming to Beacon."

"I admit, I let my curiosity get the better of me." Yang said.

"Yet, you didn't learn anything from it." Weiss said.

"Oh, I did."

"Like what?" Blake asked.

"How to party like your supposed to."

"We should have seen that coming." Velvet said, leaning into me, causing me to blush.

"And by how you're supposed to, you mean until the police or Glynda shows up." Nora said, rolling her eyes.

"Yup." Yang said.

"Anyway. So what happens next, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"Jaclyn didn't sleep of the snowmen that night. She dreamt of dozens of fluffy white kittens with sky-blue eyes. The whitest kittens

she had ever seen. They began climbing over one another. Silently at first. But they soon started to screech and hiss. It was a frightening, ugly sound. Suddenly they all wore red scarves around their necks. They clawed at each other, arching their pure white backs, hissing, and screeching. It lasted until she woke up."

Story

Yellow morning sunlight poured through the round window at the other end of Jaclyn's bedroom. She could smell bacon frying downstairs, telling her that Greta was already up. After getting up and dressed, Jaclyn decided to climb the mountain after eating. She didn't want to think about the snowmen anymore; all she wanted was to get some answers. Jaclyn knew that Conrad and his wolf were a problem. They would try to stop her if they saw her. But she had a plan to take care of them. However, it would only work if Eli and Rolonda were willing to help. Unforuntutly, Jaclyn couldn't leave the house until after lunch. Greta needed her help to hang curtains and the paintings and posters they brought from Chicago. Yet, despite the additional time, the place started to feel more like home.

"Where are you going? " Greta asked as Jaclyn put on her parka and gloves before opening the door.

"Uh ... nowhere really. Just going to hang out with Rolonda and Eli." Jaclyn answered. But as soon as she said this, she saw them walking up her front yard. Jaclyn closed the door and hurried to meet them. Eli was carrying a snow shovel while Rolonda dragged two slender tree branches. "What's that for? What are you guys doing here?"

"We have to build your snowman." Rolonda replied solemnly.

"Excuse me?"

"You won't be safe until you have a snowman in your yard." Eli explained.

"Listen, guys..."

"The snow is very wet." Rolonda said.

" Good packing snow. It shouldn't take long . El and I brought everything we need."

"But I don't have time to build a snowman. I want to climb up to the ice cave this morning." Jaclyn said, causing Eli and Rolonda to gasp.

"You can't!" Eli cried.

"Jaclyn, I warned you- " Rolonda said.

"I have to see it for myself." Jaclyn said. "I want you to come with me."

"No!" Eli shouted.

"You know we won't go up to the ice cave, Jaclyn. And we don't want you to go, either." Rolonda said, shaking her head.

"But if we all go together..." Jaclyn urged.

"No!" They both shouted. Jaclyn could see real fear on their faces. But after a moment, she gained an idea.

"Okay. Okay. I'll make a deal with you. " Jaclyn said.

"What kind of deal?" Rolonda asked suspiciously.

"I'll stay here and build the snowman, and you both will help me when we're done."

"No. We won't go with you." Rolonda insisted.

"You can't get us to go up to the ice cave, Jaclyn. No deal." Eli added.

"You don't have to go up to the ice cave. You just have to keep Conrad busy so that I can sneak past him." Jaclyn said.

"Huh? How are we going to do that?"

"We'll think of something when we get up there. If you can keep him talking to you, maybe I can sneak past and get up to the cave."

"But we don't want you to go to the ice cave!" Rolonda insisted.

"I'm going to do it one way or the other. With or without you. So are you going to help me or not?" They glanced at each other before whispering to each other.

"Will you build the snowman first?" Rolonda asked.

"You won't be safe without the snowman." Eli added. Jaclyn wanted to tell them that building a snowman wouldn't protect her against anything, and doing so was silly. But she needed their help as she could not get past Conrad and his wolf without them.

"Okay. Fine. First, we'll build the snowman." Jaclyn said.

"Then Eli and I will help you." Rolonda said.

"But we won't go any farther than Conrad's cabin." Eli added.

"Great! Let's get started." Jaclyn said, not caring that she was using the only two kids she knew in this village.

Bending down, they started gathering snow to create the snowman's body. Absentmindedly, Jaclyn noted that Rolonda was right about snow. But as they made the snowman, Jaclyn had a creepy feeling about it. She thought she had become part of the superstition. It was as if she was taking part in some kind of ancient tradition based on fear. The people of the village all built these snowmen because they were afraid, and now Jaclyn was making one.

'Should I be afraid?' Jaclyn wondered, glad they finished building the snowman. Rolonda pulled a red scarf from her coat pocket, and they wrapped it under the scarred head. The snowman's dark eyes seemed to glare at Jaclyn with its mouth in the shape of an angry sneer while the arms bobbed softly in the wind.

"Okay. Good job. Now let's get going. " Jaclyn said, motioning toward the mountaintop.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Eli asked, scared.

"Sure, I'm sure!" Jaclyn declared.

But as they started making their way along the road, Jaclyn didn't feel as sure as she pretended. Soon the houses ended as the road curved up the mountain and led them through the snowy woods. Yet, none of them uttered a single word. They kept their eyes straight ahead. The afternoon sun was slowly lowering itself behind the trees with Blue shadows stretching over the snow. And with each step they took, the air grew colder. When Conrad's low cabin came into view, Jaclyn's heart began to pound. She tried to keep my mind calm and clear. But questions after questions whirred through her brain.

'Was Conrad inside the cabin? Where was the white wolf? Would my plan work?' Jaclyn wondered.

Real World

"Talk about a crap, friend." Yang said, with the others agreeing.

'Yeah, she was.' I mentally agreed.

"Is everyone okay?" Azure asked, walking up to us.

"Yes." We answered.

"Would you all like another round?"

"Sure."

"Okay. It will be out in a few moments." Azure said before leaving.

"Okay, back to the story. After a while, all three of them stopped and stared at the cabin up ahead. The late afternoon sun had fallen behind the trees. The snow billowed in front of them in shades of gray."

Story

"I'll hide behind those shrubs." Jaclyn said, pointing to the snow-covered shrubs next to the cabin. "You run up to the cabin and keep Conrad and the wolf from seeing me."

"This isn't going to work." Eli muttered with his eyes on the cabin.

"It's getting kind of dark." Rolonda fretted. "Maybe we should come back in the morning."

"Maybe we should forget the whole idea." Eli suggested with his chin quivering.

"Hey - you promised! A promise is a promise - right?" Jaclyn exclaimed, furious that the others were thinking about leaving. Rolonda and Eli didn't reply as they stared across the gray snow at the cabin up ahead. "I came this far. I'm not going back. Are you going to help me or not?"

But Jaclyn gasped when she heard a low growling coming from the cabin. The wolf must have heard or smelled them.

"Come on!" Jaclyn whispered, knowing the wolf would be coming out for them any second before taking off for the snow-covered shrubs. And just in time as Conrad and the wolf burst out of the cabin.

"Hello!" Rolonda struggled to say.

"Hi!" Eli added.

Jaclyn watched as Rolonda and Eli ran up to Conrad. The wolf lowered its head, watching them carefully. Rolonda and Eli began talking to Conrad simultaneously.

'They're doing it!' Jaclyn thought, feeling her heart pounding. *'They're keeping his attention. Time for me to move.'*

Jaclyn could hear Rolonda talking to Conrad as she glanced over the bush. Conrad was scratching his hair, listening to Rolonda while the wolf had its back to Jaclyn. While she couldn't see his expression, she knew he was very confused and surprised as he probably wasn't expecting visitors.

'He must be wondering what Rolonda and Eli were doing up here.' Jaclyn thought before taking a deep and crouching.

Then, after a moment, Jaclyn ran as fast as possible. Her legs felt like Jell - O with her boots sinking into the deep snow. Ducking her head, she darted up the steep mountainside. It was only when she passed the bushes did she hear Conrad's angry shout.

"Hey, wait!" He shouted. Jaclyn stopped so suddenly that she fell over backward hard. Snow flew up and landed on her face, sweeping over and surrounding her.

'I'm caught, I realized. My plan didn't work.' Jaclyn thought as she stood up. But to her shock, Conrad wasn't coming after her; instead, he and his wolf were chasing Rolonda and Eli down the mountain. The wolf let out a high growl as they disappeared from sight. Jaclyn stood frozen in place, staring at where they had just been.

'Should I run after them and try to help them? No. I had to keep going.' Jaclyn thought. *'This was the plan. This was my chance.'*

Taking another deep breath, Jaclyn turned and ran up the mountainside. However, it proved more challenging as the climb was incredibly steep. So steep, Jaclyn wasn't sure she would make it. But the ground soon leveled off, with Jaclyn finding herself on a wide

ledge. The ledge was slick, though, with her boots occasionally slipping on the ice. Jaclyn pressed her back against the mountain wall and gazed up at the ice cave.

'Yes!' Jaclyn thought. The cave stood above her, as tall as a building and smooth as glass. Its wall reflects the clouds in the sky above. While she couldn't see the entrance, she could make out one of the sides.

The ledge narrowed as it curled up to the cave. Jaclyn kept her back pressed against the wall and slowly - step by step - inched her way to the top.

"Don't look down!" Jaclyn murmured.

But as soon as Jaclyn said that, she had to look down. It was a deep drop from the ledge to the ground far, far below. If she slipped and fell ...

'I'm not going to slip and fall!' She told herself as a deep, rumbling sound made her jump. Jaclyn grabbed the mountainside with both hands to keep herself from falling while the ledge trembled beneath her. Another low rumble made her cry out in fear as the ledge trembled again. It was as if the entire mountain was shaking. But after a moment, she realized the sound had come from the cave.

'Is something moving up there? Or is it the normal sound of a mountaintop in the wind?' Jaclyn wondered.

Gathering her courage, Jaclyn moved forward inch by inch. She had come this far and refused to go back now. As she continued, the ledge grew narrower, slipperier as it curved around. Another rumbling noise made her gasp. Jaclyn gasped and somehow managed to hold on while following the edge around. It seemed to go on forever, but eventually, the cave's opening came into view.

And right after it did, Jaclyn saw the most terrifying thing she had ever seen in her life. She didn't see it at first as the layer of solid ice

that covered the ledge. The glassy cave rose up behind the ridge. The gaping entrance to the cave was blacker than the darkest night. Jaclyn stood staring into the darkness, trying to catch her breath and slow her racing heart.

Clouds reflected in the glassy ice drifted rapidly to the right. They made the cave appear to move. Sharply pointed icicles stabbed down from the roof of the cave opening. They reminded Jaclyn about the wolf's sharpened teeth that came so close to her. She stared into the black cave opening and waited to see if anything would appear. But Jaclyn didn't have to wait for long as a rumble as loud as thunder, making the ledge quake, soon came out.

Afraid she might slip off, Jaclyn dropped to her knees as the rumble grew to a roar. And a second later, a tall, white figure lumbered out from the blackness of the cave entrance. An enormous snowman! Jaclyn gasped in horror as the mountain of snow moved toward her.

"NO!" She wailed, forgetting that she was on a narrow ice ledge. She backed up to get away from the tall creature and slipped off the edge as a result.

Jaclyn's hands shot up ad dug into the ledge. With a terrified groan, she scrambled back up to safety. Her body trembled and shook as she let out breaths in frantic gasps. She huddled on her knees on the icy ledge and watched the snowman as it glared down at her. Its blood-red scarf flapping in the wind. Its round, black eyes, big as doorknobs, and dark mouth turned into a fierce, angry sneer. But it was the scar that cut deeply into the side of the head that caught Jaclyn's attention.

"Ohhhhhh." She muttered as the snowman's tree branch arms reached for her. Jaclyn felt a sudden, deep cold, a cold she had never felt before, enter her body. She could see frozen waves floating from the snowman's wide body. Its giant round head tilting as its black eyes bulged even wider. But it then bellowed in a deep roar of a voice.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

Jaclyn trembled as the waves of cold floated off its body. It talks!

The stories Rolonda and Eli told her are true. It's all true. Its round eyes locked on Jaclyn's eyes, and the big snowman moved closer and closer. Jaclyn wanted to stand up and run, but it held her in place. She couldn't stand or back up. She could not escape.

"WHO ARE YOU?" The snowman bellowed again, with the whole mountain shaking.

"I - I-" Jaclyn said, quivering in fear. "Please-Please-I didn't mean to bother you."

"WHO ARE YOU ?" The snow creature thundered for the third time.

"My name? My name is Jaclyn. Jaclyn DeForest." The snowman's tree branch arms shot up, with its dark mouth gaping open in surprise.

"SAY IT AGAIN!"

"Jaclyn DeForest." She repeated, trembling. The snowman stared down at her in silence for a long while. It lowered its arms to its round, white sides after what felt like eons but was probably only a few seconds.

"DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM ?" It demanded. Jaclyn swallowed hard, not expecting the question. She tried to answer, but nothing came out. "DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM ?"

"No." Jaclyn squeaked. "Who are you?"

"I AM YOUR FATHER!" The snowman shouted.

Real World

"WAIT! WHAT!" Velvet, Nora, and Ruby asked, shocked.

"Yup. The snowman told Jaclyn that it was her father." I answered.

"Wow. I have to admit. I was not expecting that." Weiss said.

"Even though the whole 'I am you Father' trope has been done to death, this one actually has me hooked." Yang said.

"I wonder if it is one of the soccerers." Blake wondered.

"Could be. The aunt is clearly hiding something." Velvet said.

"Alright. Order up." Azure said as she returned with our food.

"Thanks." We said.

"What happened next?" Ruby asked.

"After the snowman told Jaclyn this, she let out a long wail. She wanted to get away, run, fly, slide, whatever it took to get away from the mountain. But she couldn't move. The snowman had her trapped above the ledge in his icy grip.

"Jaclyn. I am your father." The snowman said, lowering his voice. He stared down at her with his frightening, round glassy eyes. "Believe me."

"Th - that's impossible!" Jaclyn stammered, hugging herself in an attempt to stop her body from trembling. "You're a snowman! You can't be my father!"

"LISTEN TO ME!" The snowman roared. "I am your father. Your mother was a sorceress. And so is your aunt. Your aunt practices all sorts of magic."

"No!" Jaclyn shouted, the lies granting her courage. She then climbed to her feet. "That's not true! I've never seen Aunt Greta do any magic. You're lying!"

The snowman bobbed from side to side. The ledge shook beneath Jaclyn so much that she nearly lost her balance.

"I do not lie, Jaclyn." He insisted while raising his arms as if pleading with her. "I'm telling the truth."

"But-but-"

"Your mother did this to me. She used her magic and turned me into a snowman. You were only two years old when this happened. Your mother tried to turn me back but failed. Then she and your aunt Greta took you and ran away from the village."

"Your story doesn't make any sense! If what you say is true, why did we move back here? Why did Aunt Greta bring us back to the village?"

"Your aunt had a good reason for coming back. She knows that after ten years, the magic spell starts to fade."

"I - I don't understand." Jaclyn stuttered. Her head felt frozen, making it hard to think and make sense of what the snowman was telling her.

"After ten years, the spell fades. Your aunt came back to renew the spell. She wants me to stay a snowman. She wants to keep me, prisoner, up here forever. She wants to ensure I don't tell the world what happened to me. And she wants to keep you to herself!"

"Aunt Greta is not a sorceress! I've lived with her most of my life. And I've never seen her do any kind of magic. She doesn't-"

"PLEASE!" The snowman bellowed, raising a tree branch arm to silence Jaclyn. "There isn't much time. I'm your father, Jaclyn. Your real father. You've got to believe me."

"But, I—I." Jaclyn didn't know what to say since she couldn't think straight. It was all too ... crazy.

"You can get me out of this." The snowman pleaded. "You can save me. But you've got to hurry. Your aunt Greta will renew the spell soon. If you don't save me, I'll be a snowman for another ten years."

"But what can I do? I'm not a sorceress. I can't do magic. What can I do?"

"You can save me." The giant snow creature insisted. "But I cannot tell you how. If I tell you how to save me, it will only strengthen the spell. You've got to figure it out for yourself."

"Huh? But how?"

"I can give you a hint. I cannot tell you how to save me. But I can give you a hint."

"Okay." Jaclyn said softly, hugging herself tightly. And as she listened, the snowman's deep rumble of a voice recited the familiar poem.

When the snows blow wild

And the day grows old,

Beware, the snowman, my child.

Beware, the snowman.

He brings the cold

"You-you know the poem!" Jaclyn asked, shocked.

"That is your clue. That is the only hint I can give you. Now you must figure out how to rescue me."

Jaclyn already knew how to rescue him. She instantly knew when he recited the poem. It was the second verse. The secret to helping her supposed 'father' was in the second verse. But she couldn't remember it.

"Please, Jaclyn. Please. Help me. I'm your father, Jaclyn. I'm your father." The snowman pleaded. Jaclyn stared back at it, trying to decide if she should help him. Should she believe him? Should she help him? Yes, Jaclyn decided. She'd run home, find that old poetry book and read the second verse.

"I'm coming back!" Jaclyn shouted to the snowman as she spun around and ran down the ledge. However, she gasped when she nearly ran into her aunt. "Aunt Greta!"

"I tried to warn you! I tried to scare you, Jaclyn. To keep you from coming up here." Greta said.

'So it was Aunt Greta who whispered up to my room late at night, who warned me to beware of the snowman!' Jaclyn realized. Greta's dark eyes were wild; her normally pale face was bright red! Her long, black coat was open and flapped behind her in the wind. She then raised her hand to reveal a large, black book.

"Jaclyn. Is this what you're looking for?" She asked.

"The poetry book?" Jaclyn said. Greta nodded while keeping the book high above her. Jaclyn glanced back at the snowman. "Aunt Greta. Is it true? Is he really my father?"

"Huh? Your father?" Greta asked, her face twisting in surprise. "What a lie! Is that what he told you? That he's your father? It's a lie. A horrible lie!"

"NOOOOOO!" The snowman boomed, causing Jaclyn to jump. But Aunt Greta ignored the thunderous cry.

"It's a lie, Jaclyn. He isn't your father. He's an evil monster!"

"NOOOOO!" The snowman bellowed again, causing the whole mountain to shake.

"Your mother and father were sorcerers. They practiced their magic night and day. But they went too far. They created him accidentally." Aunt Greta pointed to the snowman, her face bitter. "He's an evil monster. When your parents saw what they had done, they were horrified. They froze the monster inside the snowman body. Soon after, your father disappeared. Your mother and I took you and ran from the village. We ran to be safe from the monster's horrible evil!"

"YOU ARE A LIAR!" The snowman raged, waving his stick arms wildly in the air. His scarf blew out at his sides like hawk wings.

"Jaclyn, don't believe her! Save me. Please! I am your father. Please. I know it is hard for you to believe. But your aunt is the evil one. She is a sorceress. She and your mother and I - we were all sorcerers. I am not evil. I am not a monster. Please." The snowman pleaded, reaching his arms out to her.

"Liar! I know no magic! I know no spells! I am not a sorceress! I'm not a sorceress. But I brought this book because I know its secret. I know what I need to do to make sure you stay frozen in that snowman body forever!" Aunt Greta shrieked, gripping the book tightly as she frantically shuffled through the pages.

"Jaclyn, save me. Save me now." The snowman pleaded. Jaclyn turned to her aunt and back to the snowman, wondering who she should believe. But after a second, she had an idea to find out.

"What are you doing?" Greta shrieked when Jacyln swiped the book.

She moved to try and grab the book back, but Jaclyn didn't let go. However, the book's cover soon cracked with pages flying out. Greta made a desperate swipe at it, but Jaclyn pulled it away from her. Then she backed up against the wall of the ice cave. Aunt Greta took a step toward her and gazed up at the snowman and decided not to come that close to him.

"Jaclyn - you're making a big mistake!" Aunt Greta warned, leaning against the smooth cave wall.

"I'm going to find the poem. I'm going to read the second verse. It's the only way to know the truth." Jaclyn said, flipping frantically through the pages of the old book.

"THANK YOU, DAUGHTER!" The snowman bellowed.

"I'm telling you the truth, Jaclyn! I have taken care of you all these years. I would not lie to you." Aunt Greta shouted. But Jaclyn had already made up her mind. She had to read the second verse. It was the only way she could find out who was lying and who was telling the truth. "He's a monster!"

The snowman stood still and silent, watching Jaclyn shuffle through the pages.

'Where was that rhyme? Where?' Jaclyn wondered. Hearing snow crunching, she looked up and saw that Greta had picked up a paper and was now smiling. "Aunt Greta?"

"Jaclyn. I can't let you read the rhyme." She said with the wind blowing her coat behind her as the page fluttered in her hand. Her eyes were wild.

"You-you have it in your hand?"

"I can't let you read it." Aunt Greta repeated before tossing the page over the ledge. Jaclyn let out a shriek as she watched the page float over the edge.

'It's lost.' Jaclyn realized.

The second verse is lost forever. The swirling wind will carry it down the mountain, down the steep drop. It will never be seen again. However, to Jaclyn's shock, the wind carried it back to her hand. Jaclyn grabbed it and stared in amazement. And before Aunt Greta could grab it back, she raised the page and read the second verse of the rhyme out loud:

When the snows melt

And the warm sun is with thee,

Beware, the snowman

"Noooooo!" Aunt Greta wailed before diving to swipe the paper from Jaclyn. She was successful and tore the paper to shreds. The snowman uttered a horrified groan as he bent over to reach and grab Greta. It was too late. The Jagged strips of paper fluttered to the snow.

"Aunt Greta. Why?" Jaclyn choked out.

"I couldn't let you do it. He's a monster, Jaclyn. He's not your father. I couldn't let you free him." She answered.

"She's lying. She does not want you to know me, Jaclyn. She doesn't want you to know your own father. She wants to leave me trapped in this frozen cave forever." The snowman insisted. Jaclyn turned to her aunt and noticed her face had grown stern and hard.

"Aunt Greta, I have to know the truth." Jaclyn said.

"I've told you the truth." She said.

"I have to know for myself. I - I saw the last line of the poem before you grabbed it and tore it up. I know the whole poem, Aunt Greta."

"Don't-" Great pleaded, reaching out to Jaclyn. But Jaclyn backed up against the icy cave wall and recited the rhyme from memory:

When the snows melt

And the warm sun is with thee,

Beware, the snowman

For the snowman shall go free!

"No, Jaclyn! No! No! No! No! No! No!" Aunt Greta wailed, pressing her hands to the sides of her face and repeating her cry. Jaclyn turned to the snowman and saw him begin to melt. The white snow oozed down his face and body like melting ice cream.

The black eyes dropped to the ground while the face melted into the body. The snow poured off the round body while the tree branch arms fell to the ground. Soon, his real face came into view while his body emerged from the snow.

But as Jaclyn stared at what was happening, she opened her mouth and let out a shrill scream of horror. Instead of a person, it was a monster. An ugly, snarling, red-skinned monster stomped out of the snow. Aunt Greta had told the truth that a monster was trapped inside the snowman. Not her father. Not my father.

A monster... such a hideous monster!

Crusty red scales covered its head and body; its yellow eyes rolled wildly in its bull-shaped head. The monster's purple tongue flapped from its jagged-toothed mouth.

"No! No! No! No!" Aunt Greta chanted, still pressing both hands against her face. Tears ran down her cheeks and over her hands.

"What have I done?" Jaclyn wailed. The monster let out a throaty laugh as it picked up the book with his three-fingered hands before tossing it over the side of the mountain.

"You're next!" He roared at Jaclyn.

"No, please!" Jaclyn begged. She grabbed Aunt Greta by the shoulders and tugged her away from the ledge. They pressed selves against the icy wall of the cave.

"Goodbye." The monster grunted. "Goodbye, all."

"But I saved you! Is that my reward? To be thrown over the side of the mountain?" Jaclyn pleaded. The red-scaled beast nodded with an ugly grin revealing more jagged teeth.

"Yes. That is your reward." He said before picking Jaclyn up by her waist. He squeezed her so tightly that she couldn't breathe. He then picked Aunt Greta up in his other hand and raised both of them above his head. He let out an ugly raspy groan before moving to hold over the side of the mountain.

The monster's powerful hands swung us out over the cliff edge. Jaclyn peered down at the sheer drop to the snowy ground that appeared to be miles below. Yet, to her surprise, the monster didn't let go. He swung around and dropped them back onto the ledge.

"Huh?" Jaclyn gasped. For some reason, the monster stopped paying attention to them and was staring down the ledge. Struggling to catch her breath, Jaclyn turned and followed his gaze. And saw what had startled the monster and saved their lives.

It was a parade!

A parade of snowmen.

All of the snowmen of the village were marching up to the ice cave in a single line. Their red scarves waved in the wind with their sticklike arms bobbing up and down as they rumbled up the mountainside.

Like soldiers, they came marching up to them, bouncing, thudding, rumbling forward. All of them were identical. All were scarred, stern-faced, and sneering.

"I—I don't believe it !" Jaclyn stammered, grabbing onto Greta's arm. They watch the marching snowmen in horror.

"They're all coming to serve the monster. We're doomed, Jaclyn. Doomed." Greta whispered as the snowmen rumbled up the icy ledge. The steady thud thud thud grew louder as they neared. The

sound echoed off the snowy mountaintop until it sounded as if a thousand snowmen were marching to attack them.

Aunt Greta and Jaclyn shrank back against the glassy cave wall. They had nowhere to run. The monster blocked the cave entrance with the marching snowmen cut off any escape down the ledge. Closer and closer, the snowmen came. Soon they could make out the anger in their round, black eyes and the snakelike scars on their face. Aunt Greta and Jaclyn couldn't move as fear paralyzed them. They raised their hands as if to shield themselves.

But they gasped in surprise when the snowmen marched past them and rumbled up to the monster. They bounced fast, thudding over the ice, arms waving while their dark eyes glowed. They bounced to the startled monster and pushed him back. The snowmen then piled onto the monster, crushing him. First one, then two, ten. Soon, hundreds of snowmen covered the monster.

They crushed against his scaly, red body, pushing him back and back. The monster let out an angry roar, but the snowman silenced him by rolling over his head. Aunt Greta and Jaclyn gasped in amazement as the snowmen overwhelmed the monster and pushed him against the cave wall.

They saw the monster's powerful arms flail in the air, thrashing wildly but helplessly. And then the monster disappeared behind a crush of snowmen. The snowmen pushed forward silently like a silent avalanche. And when they finally stepped back, the monster stood frozen; arms stretched out as if to attack. It was now a prisoner in the ice wall. The snowmen had pushed him into the wall, trapping him forever. Aunt Greta and Jaclyn stood trembling beside the cave entrance. They were still holding on to each other. Jaclyn's legs felt weak and rubbery, and she could feel Aunt Greta trembling beneath her coat.

"What brought all the snowmen up here? Did you do it, Aunt Greta?" Jaclyn asked. She shook her head, her eyes still wide with amazement.

"I didn't bring them here, Jaclyn. I told you the truth. I have no magic. Your mother and father were sorcerers. But not me." She answered.

"Then who made them climb the mountain to rescue us?"

"I did !" A voice cried. They turned to the ledge and saw Conrad standing there. His gray hair blew wildly in the wind while the white wolf stood at his side.

"You made the snowmen march? You are a sorcerer, too?" Conrad nodded as he gazed at the monster trapped in the ice, and a smile spread over his face.

"Yes. I sent them to rescue you." Conrad said. Aunt Greta narrowed her eyes at Conrad as she studied his face for a moment before her mouth dropped open.

"You! It's you!" Aunt Greta cried.

"Yes." Conrad said, smiling.

"Who-who is he?" Jaclyn asked. Aunt Greta turned to had and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Jaclyn. I moved back here because I thought he might still be here. And yes, I was right. He is here. Conrad is your father." Aunt Greta whispered, tears in her eyes as she grabbed Jaclyn's shoulder. Conrad and Jaclyn both cried out at the same time before he rushed across the icy ledge and wrapped Jaclyn in a hug. His long beard scratched Jaclyn's face as he pressed his cheek against hers.

"I don't believe it!" He cried, stepping back with tears in his eyes. "It's been so many years I didn't recognize you, Jaclyn. I'm so glad that Greta brought you back to the village."

"You-you're really my father?" Jaclyn stammered. Conrad didn't have a chance to answer as Rolonda and Eli came running up to them.

"Are you okay?" They cried.

"They saved your lives!" Conrad said, pointing to Rolonda and Eli. "They told me that you planned to climb to the ice cave. As soon as I heard that, I worked my magic. I sent the snowmen up to rescue you."

"Wow!" Eli exclaimed, seeing the monster frozen in the ice. "Look at that!"

"That was the evil snowman. He'll never threaten the village again." Conrad explained to them. Rolonda and Eli stepped closer to view the frozen monster closely.

"I don't understand. Why did you stay behind in the village when Mom and Aunt Greta left? Why do you live up here near the ice cave?" Jaclyn said, turning to her father. He scratched his beard and sighed.

"It's kind of a long story. When you were little, your mother and I practiced powerful magic. Our magic got out of control. We accidentally created this monster. We froze the monster inside the body of a snowman. Your mother-she wanted to leave. She was so frightened and upset. She wanted to move as far away from the village as she could. She wanted to forget it ever happened."

"And why did you stay?" Jaclyn asked.

"I stayed because I thought I owed it to the people of the village. I owed it to them to keep the snowman in his cave. To keep him from harming people. And so I stayed up here, close to the monster we created. But...but ... leaving you, Jaclyn, was the hardest thing I ever had to do!" Conrad answered before wrapping his arm around Jaclyn's shoulders. "I always dreamed that someday I could leave the mountain and go find you. And now the monster is dead. The horror is finally over. And Greta has brought you back. Perhaps... Perhaps ... we can try to be a family again."

"Hey!" Jaclyn cried out. Before she could answer her father, she noticed that the snowmen had moved to block their path. In all the

excitement of finding her father, they'd completely forgotten about all the snowmen! Now they surrounded them, staring at them with their glowing cold eyes. "Wh-what are they going to do?"

Before Jaclyn's father could answer, one of the snowmen came thumping out of the group. He rumbled up to them, arms twitching, eyes flashing. Jaclyn grabbed her father's arm as she realized they had nowhere to go or escape. The snowman stopped inches from her father and opened his mouth to speak.

"Can we go back down now ?" The snowman asked, startling everyone. "It's really cold up here!"

Real World

"With a laugh, the father said, "Yes," and they all returned home, where Jaclyn spent the rest of the day with her father, aunt, and new friends. The End." I said, closing the book.

"Nice story, Jaune." Weiss said as they all clapped.

"It was a great story." Ruby said.

"And I do like the twist where the snowman was, in fact, a monster, and the strange man was Jacnlyn's father." Blake said.

"But I did find it funny how the snowmen complained about the cold." Velvet said, earning a chuckle from everyone.

"Yeah. Well, they might be made out of snow, but even snowmen can get cold." I said, chuckling at the memories of the snowmen shivering.

"Anyway. This was a fun time. How about we order one more round before heading back to Beacon?" Nora suggested.

"Sure." We all answered.

"Should we get something for the others?" Velvet asked.

"Yeah. Pyrrha and Ren should be returning today. And I think your team could use some refreshments." I answered.

"True. Coco hates the heat." Velvet said as everyone got up from their seats. But before I could do the same, I was blinded by a bright flash.

"Yes, bun-bun. I hate the heat." The voice of Coco said before lowering a camera. And behind her were Yatsuhashi, Fox, Pyrrha, and Ren.

"RENNY!" Nora shouted before jumping toward him. He simply accepted her embrace as he missed her too.

"How did you find us?" Ruby asked.

"And what's with the camera?" Blake asked.

"We were heading back to the bullhead and decided to grab something cold to cool off. On the way, we ran into Ren and Pyrrha. They were looking for something to cool off as well. Soon we found this place and decided to try it." Yatsuhashi answered.

"And I found this camera buried between some masks in this weird shop." Coco began.

"Some of those masks seem haunted." Yatsuhashi whispered to Fox, who nodded.

"The shopkeep was hesitant in selling me this but eventually relented. I got this for you, bun-bun since you've been looking for a new one." Coco finished, handing Velvet the camera.

"What's the catch?" Velvet asked, knowing her teammate.

"That you take a picture of when you and Jaune finally tie the knot." Coco answered, smirking, not only at Velvet's horrified expression but at Pyrrha's silent gasp.

"COCO!" Velvet shrieked in embarrassment, with Coco laughing her ass off. She then turned around. "Jaune. I'm so-um? Where did he go?"

"What are you talking about? Vomit boy is right... here." Yang said, not seeing Jaune around. "Okay. Where did he go?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear him get up." Blake said.

"Perhaps he went to the bathroom?" Weiss suggested.

"No, we would have heard him and seen him." Ren said.

"Then where did he go?" Ruby asked. At that moment, the camera let out a few beeps. They all turned to it as it released a photograph. Yang took it, and they all waited for the image to appear. But what they saw shocked them. Or rather, what they didn't see.

"You don't think." Pyrrha said as the photo revealed an empty seat where Jaune was.

"Well, considering the stories and how his friend was the Werewolf of Fever Swamp, I think it did. The camera did something to Jaune." Blake affirmed. But just as she said that, they heard the bell ring that indicated someone had entered the store. Turning around, they became shocked when they realized Neo and Roman Torchwick had entered the store. They were about to grab their weapons when Roman and Neo spotted them. However, they froze when their eyes widened in horror and shock. And before they could say anything, Roman spoke up.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THE SAY CHEESE AND DIE CAMERA!"

Chapter 7

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 7: Say Cheese and Die

"What are you doing with the Say Cheese and Die Camera?!" Roman asked, looking side to side in case anything was about to happen.

"The what?" Everyone else asked, confused.

"Don't lie to us. How did you come across the accursed camera?"

"Accursed camera? Don't you think that's a bit of an exaggeration?" Weiss asked.

"Yeah. It's just an- Where did it go?" Coco asked, after not seeing the camera next to Velvet.

"What do you mean? It was just... here?" Velvet asked, looking around.

"Thanks, Neo." Roman said, getting their attention. Turning back to them, they realized that Neo had grabbed the camera when no one was paying attention to it. However, before they could say anything, they noticed the pure disdain and hatred Roman and Neo directed toward the camera.

"Why are they looking at it like that?" Yang whispered, curious but also slightly concerned. She knew the criminal duo was generally undaunted with whatever life threw at them. That was how they managed to get away with most of the crimes. So to see them like this was generally concerning.

"I'm not sure. But whatever the reason, it can't be good." Yatsuhashi said.

"That's an understatement." Roman said, with Neo nodding.

"I take it that the camera caused something bad to happen." Weiss said.

"Let me put it like this. Ever heard of the phrase a picture is worth a thousand words?" Roman asked.

"Yeah." The others answered.

"Well, with this camera. A picture is not worth a thousand words. Rather, it is worth a thousand screams."

"That's not... Okay. You lost me. I'm not sure what that means." Coco said.

"Figures." Roman muttered. However, he then saw the book that was on the table.

"We can think about it another time. Right now, we need to find Jaune." Pyrrha said.

"Jaune. You mean Jaune Arc? Blonde kid, blue eyes, kind of scrawny?"

"Yes."

"How do you know him?" Neo signed. However, she became slightly annoyed when no one answered, only to remember that only Roman could tell what she was trying to communicate.

"Uh, what did she say?" Ruby asked.

"Right." Roman said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He did find it funny that, despite working with Neo for so long, he often forgot that she was mute. A product of how well they worked together that they didn't words to discuss what they were going to do next. "Neo asked how do you all know Jaune."

"Oh. He's our friend and teammate." Ren answered.

"And soon to be more than just a friend. Right, Velvet?" Coco asked, smirking. Only to laugh a second later when Velvet attempted to cover the blush that threatened to take over her face by covering her face with her bunny ears.

"So, he's your friend. I take it he also read you some stories from the book on the table." Roman said, pointing to the book. The dummy on the front cover caused shivers to run rampant down his body. A feeling he hadn't felt since his encounter with those guardians and the robot doppelgangers when his parents sent him to the "Perfect School" when he was a lot younger.

"Yeah. It has some of the best cheesy horror stories we have ever heard." Nora answered.

"But some of them, I don't think, are just cheesy horror stories. I think some of them actually happened." Blake added.

"Yeah. Some seemed a bit too coincidental." Yang said, recalling their meeting with Lucy. While she couldn't put her finger on it, something told her that Lucy was actually the girl from the story.

"While I only heard one story, some details seemed a bit suspicious. It was almost like they were real, and Jaune didn't make them up for his story." Weiss added.

"This can't be good." Roman whispered to Neo, who nodded. "What stories did Jaune tell you?"

"And who listened to them first?" Neo asked with Roman translating.

"Ruby and I were the first ones to listen to Jaune's stories. And the first story he read to us was The Headless Ghost. The one where three ghosts were living in a house a sea captain built." Nora answered.

"Alright. Not too bad since they keep to themselves in the house and are friendly to all except troublemakers." Roman said.

"Then came the story: The Girl Who Cried Monster." Yang said.

"Again. Not bad."

"But I still think the Lucy girl we met a while ago is the same Lucy in the story."

"Who was Lucy again?" Neo signed.

"The one whose parents were monsters that ate other monsters. They kept the monster population in check, specifically the ones that pose a threat to regular people." Roman answered.

"Got it."

"What story is next?"

"Next was Velvet and me. And the story was the House of No Return." Blake answered.

"And Jaune told it to us while we were in an abandoned house." Velvet added.

"They should really condemn that freaking building." Roman muttered, annoyed. "Everyone got out of the house, right? No one stayed behind?"

"No. We all made it out." Yang answered.

"Any other stories?" Neo asked.

"The next was The Werewolf of Fever Swamp." Ruby said.

"And ironically, we were next to a swamp when Jaune told us the story." Velvet added.

"But I'm sure that Grady kid was the werewolf. I swear I saw fur on his arm and his eyes turning yellow for a few seconds." Blake said.

"I'm not too sure about that, Blake. But it would make sense why he wore a heavy sweater when it was warm outside." Yang said.

"At least Grady has control over it." Roman muttered before clearing his throat. "Any other stories?"

"Only one. And that was the story he just told us. And it was Beware: The Snowman." Weiss answered.

"At least with that one, the monster is gone, and Jaclyn's father is ensuring no other magical monsters pop up." Roman said to Neo.

"At the very least. But I'm still not going back there. I prefer Vale, where it is warm, and there are no talking snowmen." Neo signed.

"Yeah, I feel the same." Roman agreed before turning back to the others. "Is that it?"

"Yeah. That was it." Yang answered.

"But what does all this have to do with the camera? And why did you ask about Jaune?" Pyrrha asked, still confused. But she was more worried for Jaune.

"And make it quick. We still need to find Velvet's crush." Coco added, causing the poor Faunus girl to blush again.

"Look at this." Neo signed, showing Roman the photo.

"Well, the camera and questions have to do with everything since Blake and Yang are correct." Roman said, surprising the others.

"What do you mean?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"All those stories are real. And Jaune didn't run off. He disappeared."

"Disappeared how?" Coco asked, skeptical.

"The camera." Roman answered.

"We don't believe you." Weiss said.

"Figures. Let me show you." Turning toward the counter, where two employees were working, Roman took a photo with the camera producing the picture a second later. "Now, before I show you. Tell me. What do you think is on the picture?"

"What's the point of this?" Blake asked.

"Humor me and answer the question."

"The two employees working behind the counter." Ren answered.

"Wrong." Roman said before flipping the picture to show them. And to say they were surprised would have been a massive understatement. Instead of two employees working behind the counter, the photo showed a destroyed counter with one employee knocked out and the other clutching his head in agony. And the cause of it was the chandelier crashing into the counter.

"How did-" Ren began but stopped when they heard the sound of something cracking.

"WATCH OUT!" One of the employees shouted, followed by a crashing sound. Quickly turned back to the counter, everyone saw that the chandler had come loose and crashed into the counter, knocking out one employee and injuring the other.

"Did-Did the camera just predict the future?" Coco asked, now regretting her decision to buy the camera.

"No, it didn't. It did something far worse." Roman answered before tearing up the photo. "And it is the reason why your Jaune disappeared."

"So, how do we bring him back?" Velvet asked, worried for her crush.

"By doing this." Roman answered, tearing up the photo.

"How is that going to help?" Pyrrha asked, thoroughly confused. But before Roman could answer, a pair of medics came rushing through the door. However, while the others and Neo didn't see it, Roman noticed that one of the paramedics was acting a bit strange as they tended to the injured employees. While he couldn't put his finger on it at first, he immediately knew why the paramedic was acting this way and snapping his head every time he heard the buzzing of an insect.

'I better tell the Darks that another Mortman is in town.' Roman thought, glaring at the figure while adjusting the grip on his cane. "I think it would be better if we discuss it somewhere else. For safety reasons. Come on."

Not even letting them answer, Roman quickly went over to the door and ushered them out, all the while glaring at the paramedic. Confused but also wanting to know more so they could help their friend, the others got up and exited the shop.

Ten Minutes Later

Nearby Park

"I don't care. Do you want to get on her bad side? You know what happened last time. Just do it." Roman shouted into his scroll before hanging up. He then put away his scroll before sitting down next to Neo at a park table. Luckily, it was big enough for everyone to sit together.

"What was that about?" Blake asked, curious.

"I called in a few favors. Now some... workers I trust are on the lookout for Jaune." Roman answered while taking out the photo.

"Shouldn't we help them?" Velvet asked, causing Roman to sigh.

"It's... not that easy." Roman began.

"How so?" Ren asked.

"Well, the camera is unpredictable. But not how you think. It does not predict the future. It changes it, and never for the better. It is always for the worse, far worse."

"Can you predict what it might show?" Weiss asked.

"No. We, along with many others, tried but couldn't find a way to predict what the camera might show. It is too random, with no consistency between photos. Not to mention, there is no limit to what it can change."

"Can you give us some examples?" Coco asked.

"It can make you fat, thin, small as a mouse, tall as a building, turn you into a skeleton, etc. There is no limit to what the camera can change."

"Does it only affect people? Or can it change things despite no one there?" Blake asked.

"The camera can affect anything. Its power is not restricted to only altering the futures of the people. It can change the fates of animals and objects."

"Is there a way to prevent the effects in the picture from happening?" Pyrrha asked.

"And is there a way to reverse them?" Nora asked.

"That would depend entirely on what is in the photo. Some are permanent because you can't reverse some things when they happen, like a crash or getting struck in the head by a baseball. But for others, you can reverse them, which is the same as preventing

them. And that is by doing this." Roman said before showing the remains of the photo.

"By tearing up the photo?" Yatsuhashi asked, confused.

"Yes. By tearing up the photo, you can reverse whatever the camera did or stop it from happening in the first place. But you must be quick as some are irreversible, like dying."

"So now that the photo is torn up, when will Jaune return and where?" Velvet asked.

"I don't know. A person disappearing has only happened three times before today."

"So that's why you had your workers be on the lookout for Jaune." Coco said.

"Exactly. He could return at any time and any place. Jaune could be found in a few seconds next to Beacon or in a few hours in Mistral."

"Well, since we have time. Can you tell us the story behind the camera?" Weiss asked.

"Yeah. I want to know how this camera even came to be and who was the first one to own it or learn about its power." Coco added. Neo and Roman looked at each other for a moment before sighing.

"Fine." Roman sighed before grabbing the book, flipping through the pages, and stopping at the correct one. "Alright. Now pay attention, as I don't like repeating myself. But don't hesitate to ask any questions since this stuff can get highly confusing. We start off with Greg, who thinks something is very wrong with the camera he and his friends found. But his friends don't believe him and now have paid the price when they take a photo of themselves. Who is going to take the next fall for... the evil camera?"

Story

"There's nothing to do in Pitts Landing." Michael Warner said with his hands shoved into the pockets of his faded denim cutoffs.

"Yeah. Pitts Landing is the pits." Greg Banks agreed.

Doug Arthur and Shari Walker muttered their agreement. Pitts Landing is the Pits. That was the town slogan, according to Greg and his three friends. Actually, Pitts Landing wasn't much different from a lot of small towns with quiet streets of shady lawns and comfortable, old houses.

But here it was, a balmy fall afternoon, and the four friends were hanging around Greg's driveway, kicking at the gravel, wondering what to do for fun and excitement.

"Let's go to Grover's and see if the new comic books have arrived." Doug suggested.

"We don't have any money, Bird." Greg told him.

Everyone called Doug "Bird" because he looked a lot like a bird. A better nickname might have been "Stork." He had long, skinny legs and took long, storklike steps. Under his thick tuft of brown hair, which he seldom brushed, he had small, birdlike brown eyes and a long nose that curved like a beak. Doug didn't like being called Bird but was used to it.

"We can still look at the comics." Bird insisted.

"Until Grover starts yelling at you." Shari said before puffing out her cheeks and making a pretty good impression of the gruff store owner. "Are you paying or staying?".

"He thinks he's cool." Greg said, laughing at her imitation. "He's such a jerk."

"I think the new X - Force is coming in this week." Bird said.

"You should join the X - Force." Greg said, giving his pal a playful shove. "You could be Bird Man. You'd be great!"

"We should all join the X - Force." Michael said. "If we were superheroes, maybe we'd have something to do."

"No, we wouldn't." Shari quickly interjected. "There's no crime to fight in Pitts Landing."

"We could fight crabgrass." Bird suggested, causing the others to laugh. Bird was always the jokester of the group. The four of them had been friends for a long time. Greg and Shari lived next door to each other, and their parents were best friends. Bird and Michael lived on the next block.

"How about a baseball game?" Michael suggested. "We could go down to the playground."

"No way. You can't play with only four people." Shari said, pushing back a strand of her crimped, black hair that had fallen over her face. She was wearing an oversized yellow sweatshirt over bright green leggings.

"Maybe we'll find some other kids there." Michael said, picking up a handful of gravel from the drive and letting it sift through his chubby fingers. Michael had short red hair, blue eyes, and a face full of freckles. He wasn't exactly fat, but no one would ever call him skinny.

"Come on, let's play baseball. I need the practice. My Little League starts in a couple of days." Bird urged.

"Little League? In the fall?" Shari asked, confused.

"It's a new fall league. The first game is Tuesday after school," Bird explained.

"Hey. We'll come to watch you." Greg said.

"We'll come to watch you strike out." Shari added, reminding the others of her hobby of teasing Bird.

"What position are you playing?" Greg asked.

"Backstop." Michael cracked, only for no one to laugh as his jokes always fell flat.

"Probably the outfield." Bird shrugged before turning to Greg. "How come you're not playing, Greg?"

With his big shoulders and muscular arms and legs, Greg was the natural athlete of the group. He was blond and good-looking, with flashing gray-green eyes and a wide, friendly smile.

"My brother Terry was supposed to go sign me up, but he forgot." Greg said, making a disgusted face.

"Where is Terry ?" Shari asked. She had a tiny crush on Greg's older brother.

"He got a job Saturdays and after school. At the Dairy Freeze." Greg answered.

"Let's go to the Dairy Freeze!" Michael exclaimed enthusiastically.

"We don't have any money, remember?" Bird said glumly.

"Terry will give us free cones." Michael said, turning to Greg with a hopeful gaze.

"Yeah. Free cones. But no ice cream in them." Greg said. "You know what a straight-arrow my brother is."

"This is boring." Shari complained, watching a robin hop across the sidewalk. "It's boring standing around talking about how bored we are."

"We could sit down and talk about how bored we are." Bird suggested, twisting his mouth into the goofy half-smile he always wore when making a dumb joke.

"Let's take a walk or a jog or something." Shari insisted, making her way across the lawn, balancing her white high-tops on the curb's edge, waving her arms like a high wire performer.

The boys soon followed, imitating her in an impromptu game of Follow the Leader, with all of them balancing along the curb's edge. A curious cocker spaniel came bursting out of the neighbor's hedge, yapping excitedly. Shari stopped to pet him, causing the dog's stubby tail to furiously wag as he licked her hand a few times. But the dog soon lost interest and retreated into the hedge.

The four friends continued down the block, playfully trying to knock each other off the curb as they walked. They crossed the street and continued on past the school. A couple of guys were shooting baskets, and some little kids played kickball on the practice baseball diamond. But the friends paid them no attention as they knew none of them.

The road soon curved away from the school. They followed it past the familiar houses and stopped just beyond a small wooded area. They then looked up at a sloping lawn with grass that had been uncut for weeks, tall weeds poking out everywhere, and shrubs that were ragged and overgrown.

At the top of the lawn, nearly hidden in the shadows of enormous, old oak trees, sprawled a large, ramshackle house. Anyone that sees it immediately knows it was once magnificent. It was gray shingle, three stories tall, with a wraparound screened porch, a sloping red roof, and tall chimneys on either end. But the broken windows on the second floor, the cracked, weather-stained shingles, the bare spots on the roof, and the shutters hanging loosely beside the dust-smeared windows were evidence of the house's neglect.

Everyone in Pitts Landing knew it as the Coffman house. Coffman was the name painted on the mailbox that tilted on its broken pole over the front walk. But the house had been deserted for years ever since Greg and his friends could remember.

And people liked to tell weird stories about the house: ghost stories and wild tales about murders and ghastly things that happened there. Most likely, none of them were true.

"Hey. I know what we can do for excitement." Michael said, staring up at the house bathed in shadows.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Greg asked warily.

"Let's go into the Coffman house." Michael said, not giving his friends a chance to decide as he ran across the weed-choked lawn.

"Whoa. Are you crazy?" Greg shouted, hurrying to catch up to him.

"Let's go in." Michael said, his blue eyes catching the light of the late afternoon sun filtering down through the tall oak trees. "We wanted an adventure. Something a little exciting, right? Come on. Let's check it out."

Greg hesitated and stared up at the house. A cold chill ran down his back. But before he could reply, a dark form leaped from the shadows of the tall weeds and attacked him.

"Aah !" Greg screamed as he toppled backward onto the ground. But he stopped when he realized the others were laughing.

"It's that dumb cocker spaniel!" Shari cried. "He followed us!"

"Go home, dog. Go home!" Bird shooed the dog, trying to get it to go home.

The dog trotted to the curb, turned around, and stared back at them, its stubby tail wagging furiously. Feeling embarrassed that he'd become so frightened, Greg slowly pulled himself to his feet,

expecting his friends to give him grief. But they were staring up at the Coffman house thoughtfully.

"Yeah, Michael's right." Bird said, slapping Michael hard on the back. So hard that Michael winced and turned to slug Bird. "Let's see what it's like in there."

"No way." Greg nervously said. "I mean, the place is kind of creepy, don't you think?"

"So?" Shari challenged him, joining Michael and Bird, who repeated her question.

"So... I don't know." Greg replied. He never liked being the sensible one of the group, as everyone made fun of him for it. Greg would have preferred to have been the wild and crazy one, yet he somehow always ended up as the sensible one. "I don't think we should go in there."

"Are you chicken?" Bird asked.

"Chicken!" Michael joined.

Bird began to cluck loudly, tucking his hands into his armpits and flapping his arms. He looked just like a chicken with his beady eyes and beaky nose.

Real World

"Wow. Talk about some friends." Blake muttered.

"Yeah. If they did with me, they wouldn't have any teeth." Yang added.

"Or be alive if they did it to me." Neo signed with a sadistic smile.

"Hold on." Weiss said, digging into her bag.

"What do you got, Wiess?" Coco asked.

"I forgot I even had this." Weiss said, pulling out a table and sliding it to Neo.

"A tablet?" Pyrrha asked, confused.

"One that was designed with one specific purpose."

"And what's that?" Yatsuhashi asked, curious.

"It's to help people who are mute or can't speak to communicate with others. This will let Neo say what she wants without having to sign it or needing Roman to translate."

"Okay. Now that's helpful." Roman said, impressed and silently thankful for whoever made it.

"Thanks." The tablet said after Neo typed the words.

"You're welcome." Weiss said.

"Anyway. Back to the story. Greg didn't want to laugh but couldn't help himself at seeing Bird's routine. Bird always did manage to make him laugh.

Story

The clucking and flapping seemed to end the discussion. They were standing at the foot of the broken concrete steps that led up to the screened porch.

"Look. The window next to the front door is broken." Shari said, pointing to the window. "We can just reach in and open the door."

"This is cool. Are we really doing this?" Michael enthusiastically asked.

"I mean, what about Spidey?" Greg asked, being the sensible one.

Spidey was a weird-looking man of fifty or sixty they'd all seen lurking about town. He dressed entirely in black and crept along on long, slender legs. He looked just like a black spider, hence the nickname Spidey. But most thought he was a homeless guy as no one knew anything about him. But a lot of kids had seen him hanging around the Coffman house.

"Maybe Spidey doesn't like visitors." Greg warned.

Unfortunately, his warning fell on deaf ears as Shari was already reaching in through the broken windowpane to unlock the front door. And after little effort, she turned the brass knob, and the heavy wooden door swung open. One by one, they stepped into the front entryway, with Greg reluctantly bringing up the rear. It was dark inside the house, with only narrow beams of sunlight trickling through the heavy trees in front, creating pale circles of light on the worn brown carpet at their feet. The floorboards squeaked as Greg and his friends made their way past the living room, which was bare except for a couple of overturned grocery store cartons against one wall.

"Spidey's furniture?" Greg wondered.

The living room carpet, as threadbare as the one in the entryway, had a dark oval stain in the center of it. Greg and Bird, stopping in the doorway, both noticed it simultaneously.

"Think it's blood? "Bird asked, his tiny eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Probably ketchup." Greg said, feeling a chill on the back of his neck. But Bird only laughed and slapped him hard on the back.

Shari and Michael were exploring the kitchen. They were staring at the dust-covered kitchen counter as Greg stepped up behind them. He immediately saw what had captured their attention. Two fat, gray mice were standing on the countertop, staring back at them.

"They're cute. They look just like cartoon mice." Shari said, her voice making the two rodents scamper along the counter, around the sink, and out of sight.

"They're gross." Michael said, making a disgusted face. "I think they were rats, not mice."

"Rats have long tails. Mice don't." Greg said.

"They were definitely rats." Bird muttered, pushing past them, into the hallway and disappearing toward the front of the house. While that happened, Shari reached up and pulled open a cabinet to find it empty.

"I guess Spidey never uses the kitchen." She said, dusting her hands.

"Well, I didn't think he was a gourmet chef." Greg joked as he followed her into the long, narrow dining room, as bare and dusty as the other rooms. A low chandelier still hung from the ceiling, so brown with caked dust that it was impossible to tell it was glass. "Looks like a haunted house."

"Boo." Shari said.

"There's not much to see in here. Unless you get a thrill from dustballs." Greg complained, following Shari back to the dark hallway. Suddenly, a loud crack made him jump. Shari laughed and squeezed his shoulder. "What was that ?"

"Old houses do things like that. They make noises for no reason at all."

"I think we should leave." Greg insisted, embarrassed again that he was so easily scared. "I mean, it's boring in here."

"It's kind of exciting being somewhere we're not supposed to be." Shari said, peeking into a dark, empty room that was probably a den

or study room at one time.

"I guess." Greg replied uncertainly. But they soon bumped into Michael and noticed that Bird wasn't with him. "Where's Bird ?"

"I think he went down in the basement." Michael answered.

"Huh? The basement?"

"The stairs are there." Michael pointed to an open door at the right of the hallway. The three of them made their way to the top of the stairs and peered down into the darkness.

"Bird?" They asked.

From somewhere deep in the basement, his voice floated up to them in a horrified scream: "Help! It's got me! Somebody, please help! It's got me!"

At the sound of Bird's terrified cries, Greg pushed past Shari and Michael, who stood frozen in open-mouthed horror.

"I'm coming, Bird! What is it ?" Greg shouted as he flew down the stairs. His heart pounding, Greg stopped at the bottom of the stairs, every muscle tight with fear. His eyes searched frantically through the smoky light pouring in from the basement windows near the ceiling. "Bird?"

"Gotcha." Bird said as he sat comfortably, calmly, on an overturned metal trash can, his legs crossed, a broad smile on his birdlike face.

"What is it? What happened ?" Shari and Michael asked, scared for their friend, as they clamored down the stairs. But it took them only a few seconds to figure out what was happening.

"Another dumb joke ?" Michael asked, his voice still trembling with fear.

"Bird. You were goofing on us again ?" Shari asked, shaking her head.

"You guys are too easy." Bird scoffed, enjoying his moment with a peculiar half-grin.

"But Doug." Shari started. She only called him Doug when she was upset with him. "Haven't you ever heard of the boy who cried wolf? What if something bad happens, and you really need help, and we think you're just goofing?"

"What could happen? Look, it's brighter down here than upstairs." Bird smugly replied as he stood up and gestured around the basement. He was right. Sunlight from the backyard cascaded down through four long windows at ground level, near the basement's ceiling.

"I still think we should get out of here." Greg insisted, his eyes moving quickly around the large, cluttered room. Behind Bird's overturned trash can stood an improvised table made out of a sheet of plywood resting on four paint cans. A nearly flat mattress, dirty and stained, rested against the wall, a faded wool blanket folded at the foot.

"Spidey must live down here!" Michael exclaimed. Bird kicked his way through a pile of empty food TV boxes that had been tossed all over the floor dinners.

"Hey, a Hungry Man dinner!" Bird said. "Where does Spidey heat these up?"

"Maybe he eats them frozen. You know. Like Popsicles." Shari answered as she made her way toward a towering oak wardrobe and pulled open the doors. She then took out a ratty-looking fur coat, wrapped out her shoulders, and twirled in it. "Wow! This is excellent! Look! Excellent !"

From across the room, Greg could see that the wardrobe was stuffed with old clothing. Michael and Bird hurried to join Shari and began pulling out strange-looking pairs of bell-bottom pants, yellowed dress shirts with pleats down the front, tie-dyed neckties that were about a foot wide, and bright-colored scarves and bandannas.

"Hey, guys." Greg warned. "Don't you think maybe those belong to somebody?"

"Yeah. These are Spidey's dress-up clothes." Bird cracked as he turned around, wearing a fuzzy red boa wrapped around his neck and shoulders.

"Check out this *baad* hat." Shari said, turning around to show off the bright purple, wide-brimmed hat she was wearing.

"Neat." Michael said, examining a long blue cape. "This stuff must be at least twenty - five years old. It's awesome. How could someone just leave it here?"

"Maybe they're coming back for it." Greg said.

As his friends explored the wardrobe's contents, Greg wandered to the other end of the large basement. A furnace occupied the far wall, its ducts covered in thick cobwebs. Partially hidden by the furnace ducts, Greg could see stairs that probably led to an exit. Wooden shelves lined the adjoining wall, cluttered with old paint cans, rags, newspapers, and rusty tools.

'Whoever lived here must have been a real handyman.' Greg thought, examining a wooden worktable in front of the shelves.

A metal vise was clamped to the edge of the worktable. Greg turned the handle, expecting the jaws of the vise to open. But to his surprise, as he turned the vise handle, a door just above the worktable popped open. Greg pulled the door all the way open, revealing a hidden cabinet shelf.

Resting on the shelf was a camera.

Real World

"So Spidey was the one who created the camera?" Ruby asked.

"Actually, no. Well, in a sense, you could say he indirectly co-created this evil camera." Roman answered.

"Do you know who created it?" Ren asked.

"I." Romen began before sighing and rubbing his chin in aggravation and deep thought. "That's complicated. But to keep it simple, without giving some story details away, we don't know. No one knows who originally created the camera. All we know is that its original purpose and intent was far different than what it is now."

"How different?" Pyrrha asked, curious and worried.

"Vastly. Anyway. Back to the story." Roman answered. "For a long moment, Greg just stared at the camera. He didn't know why, but something told him the camera was hidden for a good reason and he shouldn't touch it. He should close the secret door and walk away."

Story

But Greg couldn't resist. He reached onto the hidden shelf and took the camera in his hands. It pulled out easily. Then, to his surprise, the door instantly snapped shut with a loud bang.

' *Weird.'* Greg thought, turning the camera in his hands. *'What a strange place to leave a camera. Why would someone put it here? If it were valuable enough to hide in a secret cabinet, why didn't they take it with them?'*

Greg eagerly examined the camera. It was large and surprisingly heavy, with a long lens.

'Perhaps a telephoto lens.'

Greg was always very interested in cameras. He had an inexpensive automatic camera, which took okay snapshots. But Greg was saving his allowance in hopes of buying an excellent camera with a lot of lenses. He loved looking at camera magazines, studying the different models, and picking out the ones he wanted to buy.

Sometimes Greg daydreamed about traveling around the world, visiting amazing places, mountaintops, and hidden jungle rivers. He'd take photos of everything he saw and become a famous photographer. His camera at home was just too crummy. That's why all his pictures came out too dark or too light, and everyone in them had glowing red dots in their eyes.

Wondering if the camera was any good, Greg raised the viewfinder to his eye and sighted around the room. He came to a stop on Michael, who was wearing two bright yellow feather boas and a white Stetson hat and had climbed to the top of the steps to pose.

"Wait! Hold it!" Greg shouted, moving closer and raising the camera to his eye. "Let me take your picture, Michael."

"Where'd you find that ?" Bird asked, curious.

"Does that thing have film in it?" Michael asked.

"I don't know. Let's see." Greg answered.

Leaning against the railing, Michael struck what he considered a sophisticated pose. Greg pointed the camera up and focused carefully. It took a short while for his finger to locate the shutter button. "Okay, ready? Say cheese."

"Cheddar." Michael said, grinning down at Greg as he held his pose against the railing.

"Very funny. Michael's a riot." Bird said sarcastically.

Greg centered Michael in the viewfinder frame, then pressed the shutter button. The camera clicked and flashed before making an electronic whirring sound. A slot pulled open on the bottom, and a cardboard square slid out.

"Hey. It's one of those automatic-developing cameras." Greg exclaimed, pulling the square of cardboard out and examining it. "Look - the picture is starting to develop."

"Let me see." Michael shouted, leaning on the railing. But before he could start down the stairs, everyone heard a loud crunching sound. They all looked up to the source of the sound and saw the railing break away and Michael go sailing over the edge.

"Nooooo!" Michael screamed as he toppled to the floor, arms outstretched, the feather boas flying behind him like animal tails. He turned in the air, then hit the concrete hard on his back, his eyes frozen wide in astonishment and fright.

He bounced once. Then cried out again: "My ankle! Owwww! My ankle!" He grabbed at the injured ankle, then quickly let go with a loud gasp. It hurt too much to touch it. "Ohhh — my ankle!"

Still holding the camera and the photo, Greg rushed to Michael, followed by Shari and Bird.

"We'll go get help." Shari told Michael, who was still on his back, groaning in pain.

But then they heard the ceiling creak. Footsteps. Above them. Someone was in the house and was approaching the basement stairs. They were going to be caught. And as they grew louder, the four friends exchanged frightened glances.

"We've got to get out of here." Shari whispered as the ceiling creaked.

"You can't leave me here! "Michael said, scared, as he pulled himself into a sitting position.

"Quick, stand up." Bird instructed.

"I can't stand on this foot." Michael said, his face showing pain and panic as he struggled to his feet.

"We'll help you." Shari said before turning to Bird. "I'll take one arm. You take the other."

Bird nodded before moving to put Michael's arm around his shoulder.

"Okay, let's move!" Shari whispered, supporting Michael from the other side.

"But how do we get out?" Bird asked breathlessly. But his breathing became tense when the footsteps grew louder, with the ceiling creaking under their weight.

"We can't go up the stairs." Michael whispered, leaning on Shari and Bird.

"There's another stairway behind the furnace." Greg said, pointing to where he saw the staircase.

"It leads out?"Michael asked, wincing from his ankle pain.

"Probably." Greg answered as he led them to the hidden staircase.

"Just pray the door isn't padlocked or something."

"We're praying. We're praying!" Bird said.

"We're outta here!" Shari said, groaning under the weight of Michael's arm. Leaning heavily against Shari and Bird, Michael hobbled after Greg, and they made their way to the stairs behind the furnace. The stairs, they saw, led to wooden double doors up on ground level.

"I don't see a padlock." Greg warily said. "Please, doors. Be open!"

"Hey, who's down there ?" An angry man's voice shouted from behind them.

"It's. It's Spidey!" Michael stammered.

"Hurry! Come on!" Shari urged, giving Greg a frightened push. Putting the camera down on the top step, Greg reached up and grabbed the double doors' handles.

"Who's down there?" Spidey shouted, sounding closer and angrier.

"The doors could be locked from the outside." Greg whispered, hesitating.

"Just push them, man!" Bird pleaded. Greg took a deep breath and pushed with all his strength, yet, the doors didn't budge.

"We're trapped." Greg said.

"Now what?" Michael whined.

"Try again. Maybe they're just stuck." Bird urged as he slid out from under Michael's arm. "Here. I'll help you."

"Ready?" Greg asked, moving to the side to give Bird some room. Nodding, they braced themselves. "One, two, three - push!"

Both boys pushed against the heavy wooden doors with all their might, with the doors swinging open a second later.

"Okay! Now we're outta here!" Shari declared happily.

Picking up the camera, Greg led the others out into the backyard, where they saw it was as weed-chocked and overgrown as the front lawn. An enormous limb had fallen off an old oak tree, probably during a storm, and was lying half in the tree, half on the ground.

Somehow, during this, Bird and Shari managed to drag Michael up the steps and onto the grass.

"Can you walk? Try it." Bird asked. Still leaning against his friends, Michael reluctantly pushed his foot down on the ground. He lifted it and then put some pressure on it again before repeating it a few times.

"Hey, it feels a little better." Michael said, surprised.

"Then let's go." Bird said.

Not wasting another second, they ran to the overgrown hedge along the side of the yard. Michael, on his own now, stepped gingerly on his bad ankle as he tried to keep up with his friends. Then, staying in the shadow of the hedge, they made their way around the house to the front.

"All right! We made it!" Bird happily cried as they reached 3440 street. Gasping for breath, Greg stopped at the curb and turned back toward the house.

"Look !" He said, pointing up to the living room window where a dark figure stood pressed against the glass.

"It's Spidey." Shari said.

"He's just staring at us." Michael said, confused.

"Weird. Let's go." Greg said. They didn't stop until they got to Michael's house, a sprawling redwood ranch-style house behind a shady front lawn. "How's the ankle?"

"It's loosened up a lot. It doesn't even hurt that much." Michael answered.

"Man, you could've been killed!" Bird said, wiping sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt.

"Thanks for reminding me." Michael said, rolling his eyes.

"Lucky thing you've got all that extra padding." Bird teased.

"Shut up." Michael muttered.

"Well, you guys wanted adventure." Shari said, leaning back against the trunk of a tree.

"That guy Spidey is definitely weird." Bird said, shaking his head.

"You see the way he was staring at us?" Michael asked. "All dressed in black and everything? He looked like some kind of zombie or something."

"He saw us." Greg said softly, suddenly feeling a chill of dread. "He saw us very clearly. We'd better stay away from there."

"What for?" Michael demanded. "It isn't his house. He's just sleeping there. We could call the police on him."

"But if he's really crazy or something, there's no telling what he might do." Greg said, worried.

"Aw, he's not going to do anything." Shari said quietly. "Spidey doesn't want trouble. He just wants to be left alone."

"Yeah. He didn't want us messing with his stuff. That's why he yelled like that and came after us." Michael quickly agreed as he leaned over and rubbed his ankle. But he then straightened up and turned toward Greg.

"Hey, where's my picture?"

"Huh?" Greg asked, confused.

"You know. The picture you snapped. With the camera."

"Oh. Right." Greg said, realizing he still had the camera gripped tightly in his hand. Carefully setting it on the grass, Greg reached into his back pocket and pulled out the photo. "I put it in here when we started to run."

"Well? Did it come out?" Michael impatiently asked. The three of them huddled around Greg to view the snapshot.

"Whoa, hold on a minute!" Greg cried, staring hard at the small, square photo. "Something's wrong. What's going on here?"

Real World

"Hopefully, nothing too bad happens in that photo." Pyrrha said.

"Wait. Has the camera ever killed someone before?" Nora asked, inadvertently causing Velvet to become pale.

"From our limited records, yes. The camera has killed a few people. But in total, the camera could have killed thousands of people." Neo answered.

"C-can you revert a person's fate after the camera kills them?" Velvet asked.

"I'll answer that once we're further into the story." Roman answered. "The four friends gaped at what they saw in the photo. Rather than showing Michael on the stairs, it showed them, Michael, in midair after he fell through the broken railing."

Story

"That's impossible!" Shari cried.

"You snapped the picture before I fell!" Michael said, grabbing the photo from Greg's hand so he could study it close up. "I remember it."

"You remembered wrong. You were falling, man. What a great action shot." Bird said, moving to get another look at it over Michael's shoulder. He then picked up the camera. "This is a good camera you stole, Greg ."

"I didn't steal it." Greg started. "I didn't- I mean."

"I wasn't falling!" Michael insisted, tilting the picture in his hand, studying it from every angle. "I was posing, remember? I had a big, goofy smile on my face, and I was posing."

"I remember the goofy smile." Bird said, handing the camera back to Greg. "Do you have any other expression?"

"You're not funny, Bird." Michael muttered as he pocketed the picture.

"Weird." Greg said before glancing at his watch. "Hey. I've got to get going."

He said goodbye to the others and headed for home. The afternoon sun was lowering behind a cluster of palm trees, casting long, shifting shadows over the sidewalk. He had promised his mother he'd straighten up his room and help with the vacuuming before dinner. And now he was running late.

'What was that strange car in the drive?' Greg wondered as he jogged across the neighbor's lawn toward his house. It was a brand new navy-blue Taurus station wagon.It was then that Greg realized his father had brought a new car.

'Wow'!

Greg stopped to admire it. It still had the sticker glued to the door window. He pulled open the driver's door, leaned in, and smelled the vinyl upholstery. The new-car smell sent his senses alight. He inhaled deeply again. It smelled so good. So fresh and new. Greg closed the door hard, appreciating the solid clunk it made.

'What a great new car. I've got to take a picture of this. To remember what the car was like when it was totally new.' Greg excitedly thought as he raised his camera and took a few steps back.

He backed up until he had framed the entire profile of the station wagon in the viewfinder and then pressed the shutter button. As before, the camera clicked loudly, the flash flashed, and with an electronic hum, a square, undeveloped photo of gray and yellow slid out of the bottom. Carrying the camera and the snapshot, Greg ran into the house through the front door.

"I'm home! Down in a minute!" He shouted as he ran up the stairs to his room.

"Greg? Is that you? Your father is home." Greg's mother called from downstairs.

"I know. Be right down. Sorry, I'm late!" Greg shouted back. *'I'd better hide the camera, he decided. If Mom or Dad see it, they'll want to know whose it is and where I got it. And I won't be able to answer those questions.'*

"Greg. Did you see the new car? Are you coming down?" His mother shouted, sounding impatient.

"I'm coming!" Greg said as he searched frantically for a good hiding place.

Under his bed? No. His mom might vacuum under there and discover it. Then Greg remembered the secret compartment in his headboard. He had found the compartment years ago when his parents had bought him a new bedroom set. Quickly, Greg shoved the camera inside the compartment before heading to his dresser to look himself over in the mirror. He gave his blond hair a quick brush, rubbed a black soot smudge off his cheek with one hand, then started for the door. But Greg stopped at the doorway as he remembered the snapshot of the car. Where had he put it? It took a

few seconds to remember that he had tossed it onto his bed. Curious about how it came out, he turned back to retrieve it.

"Oh, no!" Greg said as he gazed at the snapshot. Bringing it up to his face, he examined it. The blue Taurus station wagon in the photo was a mess. It looked as if it had been in a terrible accident. The windshield was shattered. Metal was twisted and bent. The door on the driver's side was caved in. The car appeared totaled! *'What's going on here? This isn't right. How can this be?'* "This is impossible!'

"Greg, where are you ?" Greg's mother shouted. "We're all hungry, and you're keeping us waiting."

"Sorry." He shouted, unable to take his eyes off the snapshot. "Coming."

He shoved the photo into his top dresser drawer and made his way downstairs. The image of the totaled car was still in his mind. Just to make sure, Greg crossed the living room, peered out the front window to the driveway, and sighed in relief at what he saw. There stood the station wagon, sparkling in the glow of the setting sun. Shiny and perfect. Sighing, Greg turned and entered the dining room, where his brother and his parents were already seated.

"The new wagon is awesome, Dad." Greg said, trying to shake the snapshot's image from his thoughts. But he kept seeing the twisted metal, the caved-in driver's door, the shattered windshield.

"After dinner." Greg's dad happily announced. "I'm taking you all for a drive in the new car!"

"Mmmm. This is great chicken, Mom." Greg's brother Terry said, chewing as he talked.

"Thanks for the compliment." Mrs. Banks said dryly. "But it's veal, not chicken."

"Well, it's still such excellent veal; it tastes as good as chicken." Terry said, still chewing with his face bright red. All the while, Greg and his dad were laughing.

"I don't know why I bother to cook." Mrs. Banks sighed.

"How are things at the Dairy Freeze ?" Mr. Banks said, changing the subject.

"We ran out of vanilla this afternoon." Terry answered, forking a small potato and shoving it whole into his mouth. He chewed it briefly, then gulped it down. "People were annoyed about that."

"I don't think I can go for the ride." Greg said, staring down at his dinner, which he'd hardly touched.

"Why not ?" His father asked, curious.

"Well..." Greg searched his mind for a good reason. He needed to make one up, but his mind was drawing a blank.

Greg couldn't tell them the truth. He couldn't tell them he had taken a snapshot of Michael that showed him falling. And a split second later, Michael had fallen over the railing. And now he had taken a picture of the new car, with the photo showing it wrecked. Greg didn't know what it meant, but he suddenly felt a powerful feeling of dread, fear, and...he didn't know what. It was a kind of troubled feeling that he had never experienced before. But he couldn't tell them any of that. It was too weird. Too crazy.

"I... made plans to go over to Michael's." Greg lied, staring down at his plate.

"Well, call him and tell him you'll see him tomorrow." Mr. Banks said, slicing his veal. "That's no problem."

"Well, I'm kind of not feeling very well, either." Greg said.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Banks asked, concerned. "Do you have a temperature? I thought you looked a little flushed when you came in."

"No." Greg replied uncomfortably. "No temperature. I just feel kind of tired, not very hungry."

"Can I have your chicken, I mean, veal?"Terry eagerly asked. He reached his fork across the table and nabbed the cutlet off Greg's plate.

"Well, a nice ride might make you feel better." Greg's dad said, eyeing Greg suspiciously. "You know, some fresh air. You can stretch out in the back if you want."

"But, dad." Greg stopped as he realized he had used up all the excuses he had. They would never believe him if he said he needed to stay home and do homework on a Saturday night!

"You're coming with us, and that's final." Mr. Banks said, still studying Greg closely. "You've been dying for this new wagon to arrive. I really don't understand your problem."

'Neither do I.' Greg admitted to himself, trying to shake away the feeling of dread that had taken away his appetite. ' *I don't understand it at all. Why am I so afraid of riding in the new car? Just because there's something wrong with that stupid camera? I'm being silly.'* "Okay, dad. I'll come."

"Are there any more potatoes?" Terry asked.

Real World

"Were there ever any photos that weren't harmful?" Blake asked.

"Hmm. Let me think." Roman said, racking his head. But after a moment, he couldn't really think of any examples. "I can't think of any off the top of my head."

"And typically, all photos are harmful in one way or another. And they don't necessarily have to be physical or long-lasting." Neo added.

"Honestly, the best example I can think of was when a researcher took a photo of a bird in its nest. The picture showed it destroyed with happening a second later when a baseball slammed into it. The bird was traumatized but not physically harmed. But it wouldn't go near trees again." Roman added. "But back to the story. After dinner, everyone cleaned up the table before getting into the car."

Story

"It's so easy to drive." Mr. Banks said, accelerating onto the entry ramp to the freeway. "It handles like a small car, not like a station wagon."

"Plenty of room back here, Dad." Terry said, scooting low in the back seat beside Greg, raising his knees to the back of the front seat.

"Hey, look. There's a drink holder that pulls out from the dash! "Greg's mother exclaimed. "That's neat."

"Awesome, Mom." Terry sarcastically said.

"Well, we never had a drink holder before," Mrs. Banks said before turning back to face her children. "Are your seat belts buckled? Do they work properly?"

"Yeah. They're okay." Terry answered.

"They checked them at the showroom before I took the car." Mr. Banks said, signaling to move into the left lane.

A truck roared by, spitting a cloud of exhaust behind it as Greg stared out the front window. His door window was still covered by the sticker. Mr. Banks pulled off the freeway onto a nearly empty four-

lane highway that curved toward the west. The setting sun was a red ball low on the horizon in a charcoal-gray sky.

"Put the pedal to the metal, Dad. Let's see what this car can do." Terry urged, sitting up and leaning forward. Mr. Banks nodded before pressing his foot on the accelerator.

"The cruising speed seems to be about sixty." He said.

"Slow down." Mrs. Banks scolded. "You know the speed limit is fifty-five."

"I'm just testing it. You know. Making sure the transmission doesn't slip or anything." Greg's dad defended himself. Greg stared at the glowing speedometer and saw they were doing seventy now.

"Slow down. I mean it," Mrs. Banks warned. "You're acting like a crazy teenager."

"That's me!" Mr. Banks laughed, ignoring his wife's pleas. And then, imitating Terry's voice, he said. "This is awesome !"

They roared past a couple of small cars in the right lane. Headlights of vehicles moving towards them were a bright white blur in the darkening night.

"Hey, Greg. You've been awfully quiet." His mother said, sounding worried. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay." Greg answered, wishing his father would slow down as he was doing seventy-five now.

"What do you think, Greg?" Mr. Banks asked, steering with his left hand as his right hand searched the dashboard. "Where's the light switch? I should turn on my headlights."

"The car's great." Greg answered, trying to sound enthusiastic. But he couldn't shake away the fear the photo caused him.

"Where's that stupid light switch? It's got to be here somewhere." Mr. Banks said, sounding annoyed. As he glanced down at the unfamiliar dashboard, the station wagon unexpectedly swerved to the left.

"Dad! Look out for that truck!" Greg screamed as the horns blared. A powerful blast of air swept over the station wagon like a giant ocean wave pushing it to the side. Mr. Banks swerved the station wagon to the right as the truck rumbled past them.

"Sorry." Greg's dad said, eyes straight ahead, slowing the car to sixty, fifty - five, fifty . . .

"I told you to slow down." Mrs. Banks scolded, shaking her head. "We could've been killed!"

"I was trying to find the lights." He said as he clicked on the headlights. "Oh. Here they are. On the steering wheel."

"You boys okay?" Mrs. Banks asked, turning to check on them.

"Yeah. Fine." Terry said, sounding a little shaken as the car nearly struck his side of the car.

"I'm okay." Greg said. "Can we go back now?"

"Don't you want to keep going? "Mr. Banks asked, unable to hide his disappointment. "I thought we'd keep going to Santa Clara. Stop and get some ice cream or something."

"Greg's right." Mrs. Banks said softly to her husband. "Enough for tonight, dear. Let's turn around."

"The truck didn't come that close." Mr. Banks argued. But he obediently turned off the highway, and they headed for home.

Real World

"Let that be a lesson for you, Ruby. When Dad or I start teaching you how to drive, always pay attention to the road." Yang said.

"Okay, Yang." Ruby said, rolling her eyes, causing Roman and Neo to snicker.

"The trip back to the house was silent after the near-death experience. Once safe and sound in his room, Greg took the photograph out of his dresser and examined it. There was the new station wagon, the driver's side caved in, and the windshield shattered." Roman said.

Story

"Weird. Definitely weird. I'll try it one more time." Greg said as he placed the photo in the secret compartment again before taking out the camera. Walking up to his dresser, Greg lifted the camera and aimed it at the camera above it. *'I'll take a picture of myself in the mirror.'*

But he then realized that it wouldn't work. The flash will reflect back at him and spoil the photo. Gripping the camera in one hand, Greg walked across the hall to Terry's room. His brother was at his desk, typing away on his computer keyboard, his face bathed in the blue light of the monitor screen.

"Terry, can I take your picture?" Greg meekly asked, holding up the camera.

"Hey. Where'd you get the camera?" Terry asked after typing some more and looking up from the screen.

"Uh ... Shari loaned it to me." Greg lied, thinking quickly. While Greg didn't like to lie, he didn't feel like explaining to Terry how he and his friends snuck into the Coffman house and made off with the camera. "So, can I take your picture?"

"I'll probably break your camera." Terry joked.

"I think it's already broken." Greg said. "That's why I want to test it on you."

"Go ahead." Terry said, sticking out his tongue and crossing his eyes. Greg snapped the shutter with an undeveloped photo sliding out of the slot in front.

"Thanks. See you." Greg said as he headed to the door.

"Hey. Don't I get to see it?" Terry asked, confused.

"If it comes out." Greg quickly said as he hurried across the hall to his room.

Sitting on his bed, Greg held the photo in his lap, staring at it intensely as it developed. The yellows filled in first, followed by reds and then the shades of blue.

"Whoa." Greg muttered as his brother's face came into view. "There's something definitely wrong here."

In the photo, Terry's eyes weren't crossed, and his tongue wasn't sticking out. His expression was grim, frightened. He looked distraught as the background came into view, which revealed another surprise. Terry wasn't in his room. He was outdoors. There were trees in the background, along with a house. Greg stared at the house. It looked so familiar. Was that the house across the street from the playground? He took one more look at Terry's frightened expression before tucking the photo and camera into the secret headboard compartment and closing it.

'The camera must be broken.' Greg decided, getting changed for bed.

It was the best explanation Greg could come up with as he lay in bed, staring up at the shifting shadows on the ceiling. After a few moments, he decided not to think about it anymore. A broken camera wasn't worth worrying about and staying up all night.

Tuesday Afternoon

It was Tuesday, and school had just finished. Once the bell rang, Greg hurried to meet Shari at the playground to watch Bird's Little League game. It was a warm fall afternoon, the sun high in a cloudless sky. The outfield grass had been freshly mowed and filled the air with its sharp, sweet smell.

Greg crossed the grass and squinted into the bright sunlight, searching for Shari. Both teams were warming up on the sides of the diamond, yelling and laughing, the sound of balls popping into gloves competing with their loud voices. A few parents and several kids had come to watch. Some were standing around, some sitting in the low bleachers along the first baseline. Greg spotted Shari behind the backstop and waved to her.

"Did you bring the camera ?" Shari eagerly asked, running over to greet him. Nodding, Greg held it up.

"Excellent." Shari explained, reaching for it.

"I think it's broken." Greg said, holding onto the camera while taking a step back. "The photos just don't come out right. It's hard to explain."

"Maybe it's not the photos. Maybe it's the photographer." Shari teased.

"Maybe I'll take a photo of you getting a knuckle sandwich." Greg threatened. He raised the camera to his eye and pointed it at her.

"Snap that, and I'll take a picture of you to eat ing the camera." Shari playfully threatened as she reached up and quickly pulled the camera from his hand.

"What do you want it for, anyway?" Greg asked, making a halfhearted attempt to grab it back.

"I want to take Bird's picture when he comes to bat. He looks just like an ostrich at the plate." Shari answered as she held it away from

Greg.

"I heard that." Bird said, appearing next to them, pretending to be insulted. He looked ridiculous in his starched white uniform. The shirt was too big, and the pants were too short. The cap was the only thing that fit. It was blue, with a silver dolphin over the bill and the words: PITTS LANDING DOLPHINS.

"What kind of name is 'Dolphins' for a baseball team?" Greg asked, grabbing the bill and turning the cap backward on Bird's head.

"All the other caps were taken." Bird answered. "We had a choice between the Zephyrs and the Dolphins. None of us knew what Zephyrs were, so we picked Dolphins."

"Maybe you guys should play in your street clothes." Shari said as she eyed him up and down.

"Thanks for the encouragement." Bird said before spotting the camera and taking it from Shari. "Hey, you brought the camera. Does it have film?"

"Yeah. I think so. Let me see." Greg answered as he reached for the camera. But Bird swung it out of his grasp.

"Hey, are you going to share this thing, Greg?" Bird asked.

"Huh? What do you mean? "Greg asked as he reached for the camera again, and Bird swung it away from him.

"I mean, we all risked our lives down in that basement getting it, right?" Bird said. "We should all share it."

"Well." Greg hadn't thought about it. "I guess you're right, Bird. But I'm the one who found it. So."

"I told Greg to bring it so we could take your picture when you're up." Shari said as she grabbed the camera out of Bird's hand.

"As an example of good form?" Bird smugly asked.

"As a bad example." Shari said.

"You guys are just jealous." Bird replied, frowning as he turned the cap back around to face the front. "Because I'm a natural athlete, and you can't cross the street without falling on your face."

"Hey, Bird - get back here !" One of the coaches called from the playing field.

"I've got to go." Bird said, giving them a quick wave and starting to trot back to his teammates.

"No. Wait. Let me take a fast picture now." Greg said, causing Bird to stop, turn around, and strike a pose.

"No. I'll take it." Shari insisted as she raised the camera to her eye and pointed it at Bird. But as she raised it, Greg grabbed it.

"Let me take it!" He said. But the camera went off, followed by a click and a flash. An undeveloped photo slid out.

"Hey, why'd you do that?" Shari angrily asked.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to do that." Greg said as Shari pulled the photo out and held it in her hand. Greg and Bird stood next to her so they could watch it develop.

"What the heck is that?" Bird asked, staring hard at the small square as the colors brightened and took shape.

"Oh, wow!" Greg said, surprised. The photo showed Bird sprawled unconscious on his back on the ground, his mouth twisted open, his neck bent at a frightening angle, and his eyes shut tight.

"Hey. What's with this stupid camera? "Bird asked, grabbing the snapshot out of Shari's hand. He tilted it from side to side, squinting at it. "It's out of focus or something."

"Weird." Greg said, shaking his head.

"Hey, Bird. Get over here !" The Dolphins' coach called.

"Coming!" Bird shouted as he handed the picture back to Shari before jogging over to his teammates. Soon, the whistles blew, and the two teams stopped their practice and trotted to the benches along the third baseline.

"How did this happen?" Shari asked Greg, shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand and holding the photo close to her face with the other. "It really looks like Bird is lying on the ground, knocked out or something. But he was standing right in front of us."

"I don't get it. I really don't. The camera keeps doing that." Greg answered as he followed Shari to a shady spot beside the bleachers with the camera swinging at his side.

"Look how his neck is bent." Shari continued. "It's so awful."

"There's something definitely wrong with the camera." Greg said as he began telling Shari about the new station wagon and the photo he had taken of it. But she interrupted him before he could get the words out. And the picture of Michael that showed him falling down the stairs before he even fell.

"It's just so strange." Shari said.

"I know." Greg agreed.

"Let me see that thing." Shari said, pulling the camera from his hand. "Is there any film left?"

"I can't tell. I couldn't find a film counter or anything." Greg admitted as Shari examined the camera closely, rolling it over in her hands.

"It doesn't say anywhere. How can you tell if it's loaded or not?" Shari asked, earning a shrug from Greg.

The baseball game soon got underway. The Dolphins were the visiting team. The other team, the Cardinals, jogged out to take their positions on the field. A kid in the bleachers dropped his soda can, which hit the ground and spilled, with the kid crying a second later. An old station wagon filled with teenagers cruised by, its radio blaring, its horn honking.

"Where do you put the film in?" Shari asked impatiently.

"Here, I think. Doesn't the back come off?" Greg asked, stepping closer to help Shari examine the camera.

"No, I don't think so. Most of these automatic-developing cameras load in the front." Shari answered as she fiddled with it. She then pulled at the back, but it wouldn't budge. Shari then tried the bottom but received the same result. And the same thing happened when she tried pulling off the lens.

"There's no slot or opening in the front." Greg said, taking the camera from Shari.

"Well, what kind of camera is it, anyway?" Shari demanded.

"Uh...let's see." Greg said as he studied the front, examined the top of the lends, and the back of the camera. He stared up at her with a surprised look on his face. "There's no brand name. Nothing."

"How can a camera not have a name? "Shari shouted, annoyed. She snatched the camera away from him and examined it closely, squinting her eyes against the bright afternoon sunshine. Finally, she handed the camera back to him, defeated. "You're right, Greg. No name. No words of any kind. Nothing. What a stupid camera."

"Whoa. Hold on. It's not my camera, remember? I didn't buy it. I took it from the Coffman house." Greg reminded her.

"Well, let's at least figure out how to open it up and look inside." Shari said.

While they were discussing this, the first Dolphin batter popped up to the second baseman. The second batter struck out on three straight swings. The dozen or so spectators shouted encouragement to their team.

The little kid who had dropped his soda continued to cry. Three kids rode by on bikes, waving to friends on the teams but not stopping to watch.

"I've tried and tried, but I can't figure out how to open it." Greg said.

"Give it to me. There has to be a button or something. There has to be some way of opening it. This is ridiculous." Shari said as she grabbed the camera away from him and examined it. But when she couldn't find a button or lever of any kind, she tried pulling the back off again. She then moved to the lens, but it wouldn't turn. "I'm not giving up. I'm not. This camera has to open. It has to!"

"Give up. You're going to wreck it." Greg warned, reaching for it.

"Wreck it? How could I wreck it?" Shari demanded. "It has no moving parts. Nothing!"

Real World

"Can we destroy the camera?" Weiss asked.

"No. The camera is indestructible. No matter what you say, we have tried." Roman answered.

"Some of Jaune's family and friends pulled a few favors with some Atlas generals. Let's just say even a Colossus can't destroy it." Neo added.

"Damn." The others said, shocked.

"Alright. Greg began growing frustrated as Shari examined the camera."

Story

"This is impossible." Greg said.

"Okay. I give up. Check it out yourself, Greg." Shari said, handing him the camera.

Grabbing the camera, Greg raised it to his face and then stopped. He then uttered a low cry of surprise as his mouth dropped open while his eyes gaped straight ahead. Startled, Shari turned to follow his shocked gaze.

"Oh no!" She said.

There on the ground, a few yards outside the first base line lay Bird. He was sprawled on his back, his neck bent at an odd and unnatural angle, his eyes shut tight.

"Bird!"Shari cried. Greg's breath caught in his throat. He felt as if he were choking.

"Oh!" He finally managed to cry out in a shrill, raspy voice as Bird didn't move. Running as fast as they could, Shari and Greg raced toward their friend.

"Bird?" Shari asked as she knelt down beside him. "Bird?"

"Gotcha." Bird said as he opened one eye. A weird half-smile formed on his face, and he exploded in high-pitched laughter.

Real World

"Okay. That is just a dick move. If I were there, he would actually be knocked out." Yang said, with the others agreeing.

Story

It took Shari and Greg a while to react. They both stood open-mouthed, gaping at their laughing friend. Then, his heart beginning

to slow to normal, Greg reached down, grabbed Bird with both hands, and pulled him roughly to his feet.

"I'll hold him while you hit him." Greg said, holding Bird from behind.

"Hey, wait." Bird protested, struggling to squirm out of Greg's grasp.

"Good plan." Shari said, grinning.

"Ow! Hey, let go! Come on! Let go!" Bird protested, trying unsuccessfully to wrestle free. "Come on! What's your problem? It was a joke, guys."

"Very funny." Shari said, giving Bird a playful punch on the shoulder. "You're a riot, Bird."

"I just wanted to show you how bogus it is to get all worked up about that dumb camera." Bird said as he finally freed himself with a hard tug and danced away from Shari and Greg.

"But, Bird." Greg started.

"It's just broken, that's all." Bird said, brushing blades of recently cut grass off his uniform pants. "You think because it showed Michael falling down those stairs, there's something strange with it. But that's dumb. Real dumb."

"I know that." Greg replied sharply. "But how do you explain it?"

"I told you, man. It's wrecked. Broken. That's it." Bird said, acting as if he cracked a big case.

"Bird! Get over here!" A voice shouted with Bird's fielder's glove flying at his head. But Bird caught it, waved with a grin to Shari and Greg, and jogged to the outfield with his teammates.

Carrying the camera tightly in one hand, Greg led the way to the bleachers. He and Shari sat down on the end of the bottom bench. Some of the spectators had lost interest in the game already and

had left. A few kids had taken a baseball off the field and were having their own game of catch behind the bleachers. Across the playground, four or five kids were getting a game of kickball started.

"Bird is such a dork." Greg said, his eyes on the game.

"He scared me to death." Shari exclaimed. "I really thought he was hurt."

"What a clown." Greg muttered.

They watched the game in silence for a while, but it wasn't terribly interesting. The Dolphins were losing 12-3 going into the third inning. None of the players were very good. Greg laughed as a Cardinal batter, a kid from their class named Joe Garden, slugged a ball that sailed out to the field and right over Bird's head.

"That's the third ball that flew over his head! "Greg laughed.

"Guess he lost it in the sun!" Shari said, joining in the laughter.

They both watched Bird's long legs storking after the ball. By the time he managed to catch up with it and heave it towards the diamond, Joe Garden had already rounded the bases and scored. There were loud boos from the bleachers. The next Cardinal batter stepped to the plate as a few more kids climbed down from the bleachers.

"It's so hot here in the sun." Shari said, shielding her eyes with one hand. "And I've got lots of homework. Want to leave?"

"I just want to see the next inning." Greg said, watching the batter swing and miss. "Bird is coming up next inning. I want to stay and boo him."

"What are friends for?" Shari asked sarcastically. It took a long while for the Dolphins to get the third out. The Cardinals batted around their entire order.

Greg's T-shirt was drenched with sweat by the time Bird came to the plate at the top of the fourth. Despite the loud booing from Shari and Greg, Bird managed to punch the ball past the shortstop for a single.

"Lucky hit !" Greg yelled, cupping his hands into a megaphone.

Bird pretended not to hear him. He tossed away his batter's helmet, adjusted his cap, and took a short lead off first base. The next batter swung at the first pitch and fouled it off.

"Let's go." Shari urged, pulling Greg's arm. "It's too hot. I'm dying of thirst."

"Let's just see if Bird." Greg began but didn't finish his sentence. The batter hit the next ball hard. It made a loud thunk as it left the bat.

A dozen people, players, and spectators cried out as the ball flew across the diamond, a sharp line drive, and slammed into the side of Bird's head with another thunk.

Greg watched in horror as the ball bounced off Bird and dribbled away onto the infield grass. Bird's eyes went wide with disbelief and confusion.

He stood frozen in place on the base path for a long moment. Then both of his hands shot up above his head, and he uttered a shrill cry, long and loud, like the high-pitched whinny of a horse. His eyes rolled up in his head. He sank to his knees and uttered another cry, softer this time. Then he collapsed, sprawling onto his back, his neck at an unnatural angle, his eyes closed. He didn't move.

Real World

"Karma." Everyone, including Neo, minus Roman, said simultaneously. And while Roman didn't say anything, he did smirk.

"After Bird fell to the ground, everyone rushed over to his unconscious body. Shari lept off the bench and continued shouting,

"Bird! Bird!" as she ran toward the circle of concerned onlookers." Roman said.

Story

Greg started to follow but stopped when he saw a familiar figure crossing the street at a full sprint, waving to him.

"Terry!" Greg shouted, surprised. Why was his brother coming to the playground? Why wasn't he at his afterschool job at the Dairy Freeze? "Terry? What's happening?"

"I... ran... all... the... way." Terry said, gasping for breath as sweat poured down his bright red forehead.

"Terry, what's wrong?" Greg asked as a sick feeling crept up in his stomach.

As Terry approached, his face held the same frightened expression as in the photograph Greg had snapped of him. He wore the same frightened expression on his face with the same house behind him across the street. The snapshot had come true. Just as the snapshot of Bird lying on the ground had come true. Greg's throat suddenly felt as dry as cotton. He realized that his knees were trembling.

"Terry, what is it?"

"It's Dad." Terry answered, putting a heavy hand on Greg's shoulder.

"Huh? Dad?"

"You've got to come home, Greg. Dad's been in a bad accident."

"An accident?" Greg asked as he felt his head spin. Terry's words weren't making any sense to him.

"In the new car." Terry explained, again placing a heavy hand on Greg's trembling shoulder. "The new car is totaled. Completely totaled."

"Oh." Greg gasped, feeling weak.

"Come on. Hurry." Terry said as he squeezed Greg's shoulder. Greg began running after his brother, holding the camera tightly in one hand. Reaching the street, he turned back to the playground to see what was happening with Bird. A large crowd was still huddled around Bird, blocking him from sight.

'But what was that dark shadow behind the bleachers?' Greg wondered.

Someone was back there, someone all in black. Someone was hiding.

"Come on!" Terry urged. Greg stared hard at the bleachers. The dark figure pulled back out of sight. "Come on, Greg!"

"I'm coming!" Greg shouted as he followed his brother toward home.

One Hour Later

The hospital walls were pale green. The uniforms worn by the nurses scurrying through the brightly lit corridors were white. The floor tiles beneath Greg's feet as he hurried with his brother toward their father's room were dark brown with orange specks.

Colors.

All Greg could see were blurs of colors and indistinct shapes. His sneakers thudded noisily against the hard tile floor. He could barely hear them over the pounding of his heart. Totaled. The car had been totaled, just like in the snapshot.

Greg and Terry turned a corner. The walls in this corridor were pale yellow. Terry's cheeks were red. Two doctors passed by wearing lime green surgical gowns.

Greg blinked and tried to see clearly. But it was all passing by too fast, all too unreal. Even the sharp hospital smell, that unique aroma

of rubbing alcohol, stale food, and disinfectant, couldn't make it real for him. Then the two brothers entered their father's room, and everything became real.

The colors faded. The images became sharp and clear. Their mother jumped up from the folding chair beside the bed.

"Hi, boys." Their mother said, clenching a wadded-up tissue in her hand. It was obvious that she had been crying. She forced a tight smile on her face, but her eyes were red-rimmed, her cheeks pale and puffy. Stopping just inside the doorway of the small room, Greg returned his mother's greeting in a soft, choked voice. Then his eyes, focusing clearly now, turned to his father.

Mr. Banks had a mummy-like bandage covering his hair. One arm was in a cast. The other lay at his side and had a tube attached just below the wrist, dripping a dark liquid into the arm. The bedsheet was pulled up to his chest.

"Hey. How's it going, guys?" Their father asked. His voice sounded fogged in as if coming from far away.

"Dad." Terry started.

"He's going to be okay." Mrs. Banks interrupted, seeing the frightened looks on her sons' faces.

"I feel great." Mr. Banks said groggily.

"You don't look so great." Greg blurted out, stepping up cautiously to the bed.

"I'm okay. Really. A few broken bones. That's it." Their father insisted before wincing in pain. "I guess I'm lucky."

"You're very lucky." Mrs. Banks agreed quickly said.

'What's the lucky part?' Greg wondered, unable to take his eyes off the tube stuck into his father's arm.

Again, Greg thought of the snapshot of the car. It was up in his room at home, tucked into the secret compartment in his headboard. The snapshot shows the car totaled and the driver's side caved in. Should he tell them about it? He couldn't decide. Would they believe him if he did tell them?

"What'd you break, Dad?" Terry asked, sitting on the radiator in front of the windowsill, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets.

"Your father broke his arm and a few ribs." Mrs. Banks answered. "And he had a slight concussion. The doctors are watching him for internal injuries. But so far, so good."

"I was lucky." Mr. Banks repeated, smiling at Greg.

"Dad, I have to tell you about this photo I took." Greg said suddenly, speaking rapidly, his voice trembling with nervousness. "I took a picture of the new car, and-"

"The car is completely wrecked." Mrs. Banks interrupted. Sitting on the edge of the folding chair, she rubbed her fingers, working her wedding ring round and around, something she always did when she was nervous. "I'm glad you boys didn't see it. It's a miracle he wasn't hurt any worse."

"This photo-" Greg started again.

"Later." His mother said brusquely, giving him a meaningful stare. "Okay?"

'This is important.' Greg thought, feeling his face grow hot. Then he decided they probably wouldn't believe him, anyway. Who would believe such a crazy story?

"Will we be able to get another new car?" Terry asked.

"I have to call the insurance company." Mr. Banks answered, nodding.

"I'll call them when I get home. You don't exactly have a hand free." Mrs. Banks said, causing everyone to laugh nervously.

"I feel kind of sleepy." Mr. Banks said, his eyes half closed, his voice muffled.

"It's the painkillers the doctors gave you. Get some sleep. I'll come back in a few hours." Mrs. Banks said as she patted his hand. She stood up, still fiddling with her wedding band, and motioned with her head toward the door.

"Bye, dad." Greg and Terry said in unison. Their father muttered a reply as they followed their mother out the door.

"What happened?" Terry asked as they made their way past a nurses ' station, then down the long, pale yellow corridor. "I mean, the accident."

"Some guy ran right through a red light. He plowed right into your father's side of the car. He said his brakes weren't working. I don't know. I just don't know what to say. Thank goodness he's going to be okay." Mrs. Banks answered, her red-rimmed eyes straight ahead. She shook her head, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. They turned into the green corridor, walking side by side. Several people were waiting patiently for the elevator at the far end of the hall.

Once again, Greg found himself thinking of the snapshots he had taken with the weird camera. First Michael. Then Terry. Then Bird. Then his father. All four photos showed something terrible. Something terrible that hadn't happened yet. And then all four photos had come true. Greg felt a chill as the elevator doors opened, and the small crowd of people moved forward to squeeze inside. What was the truth about the camera? Does the camera show the future? Or does it actually cause bad things to happen?

Real World

"How long does it take for the effects from the camera to take place?" Ren asked.

"What?" Roman asked, surprised.

"How long can the camera delay the effects? With Jaune, it happened instantly. But in the story, the car didn't happen until a few days later." Yatsuhashi said.

"Oh. I get it. There is no limit. I remember one time the effects of the camera didn't happen until a year later." Roman answered.

"Is it possible to delay the effects?" Pyrrha asked. "Let's say it is a car accident, but you never leave your house."

"Doesn't matter. You can wait for centuries; it will find a way to make it happen." Neo answered. **"There is no stopping it outside of tearing up the photo."**

"Yeah. I know Bird's okay. I saw him yesterday, remember? He was lucky. Real lucky. He didn't have a concussion or anything." Greg said into the phone receiver. On the other end of the line - in the house next door - Shari agreed, then repeated her request. "No, Shari. I really don't want to."

"Bring it." Shari demanded. "It's my birthday."

"I don't want to bring the camera. It's not a good idea. Really." It was the following Saturday afternoon. Greg had been nearly out the door, on his way next door to Shari's birthday party, when the phone rang.

"Hi, Greg. Why aren't you on your way to my party?" Shari had asked when he'd run to pick up the receiver.

"Because I'm on the phone with you." Greg had replied dryly.

"Well, bring the camera, okay?" Greg hadn't looked at the camera or removed it from its hiding place since his father's accident.

"I don't want to bring it." Greg insisted, despite Shari's high-pitched demands. "Don't you understand, Shari? I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

"Oh, Greg." She said, talking to him as if he were a three-year-old. "You don't really believe that, do you? You don't really believe that a camera can hurt people."

"I don't know what I believe." Greg said after a moment. "I don't know what I believe. I only know that first, Michael, then Bird. And I had a dream, Shari. Last night."

"Huh? What kind of dream?" Shari asked impatiently.

"It was about the camera. I was taking everyone's picture. My whole family, Mom, Dad, and Terry, were barbecuing in the backyard. I held up the camera. I kept saying, 'Say Cheese, Say Cheese,' over and over. And when I looked through the viewfinder, they were smiling back, but ... they were skeletons. All of them. Their skin was gone, and - and... at me."

Greg's voice trailed off.

"What a dumb dream." Shari said, laughing.

"But that's why I don't want to bring the camera." Greg insisted. "I think -"

"Bring it, Greg." Shari interrupted. "It's not your camera, you know. All four of us were in the Coffman house. It belongs to all four of us. Bring. it."

"But why, Shari?" Greg demanded.

"It'll be a goof, that's all. It takes such weird pictures."

"That's for sure." Greg muttered.

"We don't have anything else to do for my party." Shari told him. "I wanted to rent a video, but my mom says we have to go outdoors. She doesn't want her precious house messed up. So I thought we could take everyone's picture with the weird camera. You know. See what strange things come out."

"Shari, I really don't-"

"Bring it." Shari said before hanging up.

Real World

"Wow. Talk about some friend." Ruby said.

"Yeah." Neo agreed, recalling the times she met Shari.

"Roman. Is that how the camera got its name? From that dream?" Coco asked.

"Yes and no. The camera doesn't actually have a name. The Say Cheese and Die name is a nickname." Roman answered. "But yes, it came from that dream."

"Also, these stories and all that happened are real." Blake began. "Is Greg still friends with Shari, Bird, and Michael?"

"No. They stayed friends for a few years afterward. But things fell sour between them. Now they try to stay away from each other as much as possible." Neo answered.

"But back to the story. Greg stood for a long time, staring at the receiver and the demand Shari had given him. He thought hard about what he should do." Roman said.

Story

Greg replaced the receiver and headed reluctantly up to his room.

With a loud sigh, he pulled the camera from its hiding place in his headboard.

"It's Shari's birthday, after all." Greg muttered to himself. But as he picked up the camera, he noticed his hands were trembling. He then realized he was afraid of it.

'I shouldn't be doing this.' Greg thought, feeling a heavy knot in his stomach as he exited his house. And as he made his way across the flagstone patio to Shari's backyard, he saw his friend Bird. "How's it going, Bird?"

"I'm feeling okay." Bird answered, slapping his friend a high five. "The only problem is, ever since that ball hit me from time to time, I start - pluuccck cluuuck cluuuuck! Clucking like a chicken!"

"Hey, Bird - go lay an egg!" Someone yelled, and everyone laughed as Bird flapped his arms and started strutting across the backyard, clucking at the top of his voice.

"Bird's at it again." Michael said, shaking his head as he gave Greg a friendly punch to the shoulder. Michael, his red hair unbrushed as usual, was wearing faded jeans and a flowered Hawaiian sports shirt about three sizes too big for him.

"Where'd you get that shirt?" Greg asked, holding Michael at arm's length by the shoulders to admire it.

"In a cereal box." Bird chimed in, still flapping his arms.

"My grandmother gave it to me." Michael answered, frowning.

"He made it in home ec." Bird interrupted. One joke was never enough.

"But why did you wear it?" Greg asked.

"Everything else was dirty." Michael shrugged.

"Now, this one's dirty, too." Bird said after picking up a clump of dirt and rubbing it on Michael's shirt.

"Hey, you!" Michael said with playful anger as he grabbed and shoved Bird into the hedge.

"Did you bring it?" Hearing Shari's voice, Greg turned towards the house and saw her jogging across the patio in his direction. Her black hair was pulled back in a single braid, and she wore an oversized, silky yellow top that came down over black spandex leggings. A charm bracelet filled with tiny silver charms - a birthday present - jangled at her wrist. "Did you bring it?"

"Yeah." Greg reluctantly held up the camera.

"Excellent." Shari said.

"I really don't want." Greg started.

"You can take my picture first since it's my birthday." Shari interrupted before striking a sophisticated pose while leaning against a tree with her hand behind her head. "Here. How's this?"

"Are you sure you want me to do this, Shari ? ". Greg asked as he raised the camera.

"Yeah. Come on. I want to take everyone's pic."

"But it'll probably come out weird." Greg protested.

"I know." Shari replied impatiently, holding her pose. "That's the fun of it."

"But, Shari-"

"Michael puked on his shirt." Greg heard Bird telling someone near the hedge.

"I did not!"Michael screamed.

"You mean it looks like that naturally?" Bird asked. Greg could hear a lot of raucous laughing, all of it at Michael's expense.

"Will you take the picture!" Shari cried, holding on to the slender trunk of the tree. Greg pointed the lens at her and pressed the button. The camera whirred, and the undeveloped, white square rolled out.

"Hey, are we the only boys invited?"Michael asked, walking to Shari.

"Yeah. Just you three." Shari said. "And nine girls."

"Oh, wow." Michael said, making a face.

"Take Michael's picture next." Shari told Greg.

"No way!" Michael quickly said, raising his hands as if to shield himself and backing away. "The last time you took my picture with that thing, I fell down the stairs."

Trying to get away, Michael backed right into Nina Blake, one of Shari's friends. She reacted with a squeal of surprise, then gave him a playful shove, and he kept right on backing away.

"Michael, come on. It's my party." Shari shouted.

"What are we going to do? Is this it?" Nina demanded from halfway across the yard.

"I thought we'd take everyone's picture and then play a game or something." Shari answered.

"A game?" Bird asked. "You mean like Spin the Bottle?"

"Truth or Dare." Nina suggested.

"Yeah. Truth or Dare!" A couple of other girls called in agreement.

"Oh, no.," Greg groaned quietly to himself. Truth or Dare meant a lot of kissing and awkward, embarrassing stunts. Nine girls and only three boys. It was going to be really embarrassing.

'How could Shari do this to us?' Greg wondered.

"Well, did it come out?" Shari asked, grabbing his arm. "Let me see."

Greg was so upset about having to play Truth or Dare that he had forgotten about the snapshot developing in his hand. He held it up, and they both examined it.

"Where am I?" Shari asked in surprise. "What were you aiming at? You missed me!"

"Huh?" Greg stared at the snapshot. There was the tree. But no Shari. "Weird! I pointed it right at you. I lined it up carefully."

"Well, you missed me. I'm not in the shot." Shari said, disgusted.

"But, Shari."

"I mean, come on. I'm not invisible, Greg. I'm not a vampire or something. I can see my reflection in mirrors. And I do usually show up in photos."

"But, look-" Greg stared hard at the photograph. "There's the tree you were leaning against. You can see the tree trunk clearly. And there's the spot where you were standing."

"But where am I? Never mind." Shari demanded, jangling her charm bracelet noisily. She grabbed the snapshot from him and tossed it on the grass. "Take another one. Quick."

"Well, okay. But." Greg was still puzzling over the photo. Why hadn't Shari shown up in it? He bent down, picked it up, and shoved it into his pocket.

"Stand closer this time." She instructed.

Greg moved a few steps closer, carefully centered Shari in the viewfinder, and snapped the picture. A square of film zipped out the front.

Shari walked over and pulled the picture from the camera.

"This one better turn out." Shari said, staring hard at it as the colors began to darken and take form.

"If you really want pictures of everyone, we should get another camera." Greg said, his eyes also locked on the snapshot.

"Hey. I don't believe it! You were right. The dumb camera is broken. Forget it." Shari cried. Again, she was invisible. The tree was photographed clearly and in perfect focus. But Shari was nowhere to be seen. Shari handed the photo to Greg before turning away and calling "Truth Or Dare!" to the others. There were some cheers and some groans. Shari headed them back to the woods behind her backyard to play. "More privacy," she explained. There was a circular clearing just beyond the trees, a perfect, private place. The game was just as embarrassing as Greg had imagined. Among the boys, only Bird seemed to be enjoying it.

'Bird loves dumb stuff like this.' Greg thought, with some envy.

Luckily, after little more than half an hour, he heard Mrs. Walker, Shari's mom, calling from the house, summoning them back to cut the birthday cake.

"Aw, too bad." Greg said sarcastically.

"Just when the game was getting good." Bird said, grinning. "Michael's shirt is scaring the squirrels, anyway."

Laughing and talking about the game, the kids made their way back to the patio where the pink and - white birthday cake, candles all lit, was waiting on the round umbrella table.

"I must be a pretty bad mom. Allowing you all to go off into the woods by yourselves." Mrs. Walker joked, causing some of the girls to laugh. Cake knife in her hand, Mrs. Walker looked around. "Where's Shari?"

"She was with us in the woods." Nina told Mrs. Walker as everyone turned their eyes to search the backyard. "Just a minute ago."

"Hey, Shari!" Bird called, cupping his hands to his mouth as a megaphone.

"Earth calling Shari! It's cake time!"

No reply. No sign of her.

"Did she go in the house?" Greg asked.

"No. She didn't come by the patio. Is she still in the woods?" Mrs. Walker asked.

"I'll go check." Bird said.

Calling Shari's name, he ran to the edge of the trees at the back of the yard and then disappeared into the trees, still calling. A few minutes later, Bird emerged, signaling to the others with a shrug. No sign of her. They searched the house. The front yard. The woods again. But Shari had vanished.

A Few Hours Later

Greg sat in the shade with his back against the tree trunk, the camera on the ground at his side, and watched the policemen work. They covered the backyard and could be seen bending low as they searched the woods. He could hear their voices but couldn't make out what they were saying. Their faces were intent and bewildered. Soon, more policemen arrived, grim-faced, business-like. Yet, not even an hour later after they arrived, even more policemen arrived.

Mrs. Walker had called her husband home from a golf game. They sat huddled together on canvas chairs in the corner of the patio. They whispered to each other, eyes darting across the yard as they held hands while looking pale and worried. Everyone else had left. On the patio, the table was still set. The birthday candles had burned all the way down, the blue and red wax melting in hard puddles on the pink-and-white icing, the cake untouched.

"No sign of her. " A red-cheeked policeman with a white-blond mustache told the Walkers as he pulled off his cap and scratched his head, revealing short, blond hair.

"Did someone...take her away?" Mr. Walker asked, still holding his wife's hand.

"No sign of a struggle. No sign of anything, really." The policeman answered.

"I just don't understand it." Mrs. Walker sighed loudly and lowered her head, followed by a long, painful silence.

"We'll keep looking. I'm sure we'll find ... something." the policeman assured before returning to the woods. But he stopped in front of Greg. "Oh. Hi. You're still here, son? All the other guests have gone home."

"Yeah, I know." Greg replied solemnly, lifting the camera into his lap.

"I'm Officer Riddick."

"Yeah, I know."

"How come you didn't go home after we talked to you, like the others?"

"I'm just upset, I guess. I mean, Shari's a good friend, you know? Besides, I live right over there." Greg answered before gesturing with his head to his house next door.

"Well, you might as well go home, son." Riddick said, turning his eyes to the woods with a frown. "This search could take a long time. We haven't found a thing back there yet."

"I know." Greg said, rubbing his hand against the back of the camera. But as he did, he felt miserable and frightened. *'And I know that this camera is why Shari is missing.'*

"One minute, she was there. The next minute she was gone." The policeman said, studying Greg's face as if looking for answers there.

"Yeah. "It's so weird." Greg replied. *'It's weirder than anyone knows. The camera made her invisible. The camera did it. First, she vanished from the snapshot. Then she vanished in real life. The camera did it to her. I don't know how. But it did.'*

"Do you have something more to tell me?" Riddick asked, hands resting on his hips, his right hand just above the worn brown holster that carried his pistol. "Did you see something? Something that might give us a clue to help us out? Something you didn't remember to tell me before? "

'Should I tell him?' Greg wondered.

If Greg told the policeman about the camera, he'd ask where he got it. And he'll have to tell him he got it in the Coffman house. And they'll all get in trouble for breaking in there. But big deal. Shari is missing. Gone. Vanished. That's a lot more important. Greg should tell him. But as soon as Greg decided to tell him, he hesitated. There was little chance the policeman would even believe him. And even if he did, how would it bring Shari back?

"You look very troubled." Riddick said, squatting down next to Greg in the shade. "What's your name again?"

"Greg. Greg Banks."

"Well, you look very troubled, Greg. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you? Why don't you tell me what's on your mind? I think it'll make you feel a lot better."

Greg took a deep breath and glanced up to the patio. Mrs. Walker had covered her face with her hands. Her husband was leaning over her, trying to comfort her.

"Well ..." Greg started.

"Go ahead, son." Riddick urged softly. "Do you know where Shari is?"

"It's this camera." Greg blurted out. He could suddenly feel the blood throbbing against his temples.

He took a deep breath and then continued. "You see, this camera is weird."

"What do you mean?" Riddick asked quietly. Greg took another deep breath.

"I took Shari's picture. Before. When I first arrived. I took two pictures. And she was invisible. In both of them. See?"

"No. I don't understand." Riddick answered, closing his eyes, then opening them.

"Shari was invisible in the picture. Everything else was there. But she wasn't. She had vanished, see. And, then, later, she vanished for real. It predicts the future, I guess. Or it makes bad things happen."

Greg raised the camera, attempting to hand it to the policeman. Riddick made no attempt to take it. He stared hard at Greg, his eyes narrowing and expression hardening. Greg felt a sudden stab of fear.

'Oh, no. Why is he looking at me like that? What is he going to do?' Greg thought, still holding the camera out to the policeman.

"The camera makes bad things happen?" Riddick's eyes burned into Greg's as he climbed to his feet.

"Yes." Greg told him. "It isn't my camera, see? And every time I take a picture.

"Son, that's enough." Riddick gently said as he reached down and rested a hand on Greg's trembling shoulder. "I think you're very upset, Greg. I don't blame you. This is very upsetting for everyone."

"But it's true-" Greg started to insist.

"I'm going to ask that officer over there." Riddick said, pointing to a nearby officer. "To take you home now. And I'm going to have him tell your parents that you've been through a very frightening experience."

'I knew he wouldn't believe me. How could I have been so stupid? Now he thinks I'm some kind of a nut case.' Greg bitterly thought as Riddick called to a policeman at the side of the house near the hedge.

"No, that's okay." Greg said, quickly pulling himself up and cradling the camera in his hand. "I can make it home okay."

"You sure ?" Riddick asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Yeah. I can walk by myself."

"If you have anything to tell me later." Riddick said, lowering his gaze to the camera. "Just call the station, okay?"

"Okay." Greg replied, walking slowly toward the front of the house.

"Don't worry, Greg. We'll do our best." Riddick called after him. "We'll find her. Put the camera away and try to get some rest, okay?"

"Okay." Greg muttered as he hurried past the Walkers, who were still huddled together under the umbrella on the patio *. 'Why was I so*

stupid? Why did I expect that policeman to believe such a weird story? I'm not even sure I believe it myself.'

A few minutes later, Greg pulled open the back screen door and entered his kitchen.

"Anybody home?"

No reply. Greg headed through the back hall towards the living room.

"Anyone home?"

No one. Terry was at work. His mother must have been visiting his dad at the hospital. Greg felt bad. He really didn't feel like being alone now. He really wanted to tell them about what had happened to Shari. He really wanted to talk to them. Still cradling the camera, Greg climbed the stairs to his room.

Greg stopped in the doorway, blinked twice, then uttered a cry of horror.

His books were scattered all over the floor. The covers had been pulled off his bed. His desk drawers were all open; their contents were strewn around the room. The desk lamp was on its side on the floor. All of his clothes had been pulled from the dresser and his closet and tossed everywhere. Someone had been in Greg's room and turned it upside down!

'Who would do this?' Greg asked himself, staring in horror at his ransacked room.

Who would tear my room apart like this?

He realized that he knew the answer. He knew who would do it, who had done it. Someone was looking for the camera. Someone was desperate enough to get the camera back. Was it Spidey? The creepy guy who dressed all in black was living in the Coffman house. Was he the owner of the camera?

'Yes.' Greg thought.

Spidey had done it. Spidey had been watching Greg, spying on Greg from behind the bleachers at the Little League game. He knew that Greg had his camera. And he knew where Greg lived. That thought was the most chilling of all. He knew where Greg lived.

Greg turned away from the chaos in his room, leaned against the wall of the hallway, and closed his eyes. He pictured Spidey, the dark figure creeping along so evilly on his spindly legs. He imagined him inside the house, Greg's house, inside Greg's room.

'He was here.' Greg thought. *'He pawed through all my things. He wrecked my room.'*

Stepping back into his room, Greg felt conflicted. He felt like shouting angrily and crying for help all at once. But he was all alone. No one to hear him. No one was there to help him.

'What now?' He wondered. *'What now?'*

Suddenly, leaning against the doorframe, staring at his ransacked room, he knew what he had to do.

Real World

"When Shari returned, did she remember anything?" Ruby asked.

"Yes. But Shari couldn't remember anything clearly." Roman answered.

"It was all a blur to her. The only thing she could recall somewhat clearly was being in an area with a lot of rooms. It was kind of like a backspace of some sort. But she couldn't explore it as it became a blur again." Neo added.

"But back to the story. After cleaning up his room as fast as he could, Greg picked up the receiver and called his friend, Bird." Roman said.

Story

"Hey, Bird, it's me." Greg said.

"Did they find Shari?" Bird asked eagerly.

"I haven't heard. I don't think so." Greg said, surveying his room. It was finally almost back to normal. He had put everything back, cleaned, and straightened. His parents would never guess someone ransacked his room.

"Listen, Bird; I'm not calling about that." Greg said, speaking rapidly into the phone. "Call Michael for me, okay? Meet me at the playground. By the baseball diamond."

"When? Now?" Bird asked, sounding confused.

"Yeah." Greg answered. "We have to meet. It's important."

"It's almost dinnertime." Bird said. "I don't know if my parents-"

"It's important." Greg repeated. "I've got to see you guys. Okay?"

"Well ... maybe I can sneak out for a few minutes." Bird said, lowering his voice. And then Greg heard him shout to his mother: "It's no one, Ma! I'm talking to no one!"

'Boy, that's quick thinking!' Greg thought sarcastically. *'He's a worse liar than I am!'*

"I know I'm on the phone. But I'm not talking to anyone. It's only Greg." Bird shouted.

'Thanks a lot, pal.' Greg thought.

"I gotta go." Bird said.

"Get Michael, okay?" Greg urged.

"Yeah. Okay. See you."

Greg replaced the receiver, then listened for his mother. Nothing but silence downstairs, meaning she wasn't home yet. But Greg then realized his mother didn't know about Shari. Greg knew she and his dad were going to be very upset, very upset. Almost as upset as he was. Thinking about his missing friend, he went to his bedroom window and looked down on her yard next door. It was deserted now. The police had all left, and Shari's shaken parents must have gone inside.

A squirrel sat under the wide shade of the big tree, gnawing furiously at an acorn, another acorn at his feet. In the corner of the window, Greg could see the birthday cake, still sitting forlornly on the deserted table, the places all set, the decorations still standing.

'A birthday party for ghosts.' Greg shuddered. "Shari is alive. They'll find her. She's alive."

Greg knew what he had to do now. Forcing himself away from the window, he hurried to meet his two friends.

Ten Minutes Later

"No way. Have you gone totally bananas?" Bird said heatedly, leaning against the bleacher bench. Swinging the camera by its cord, Greg turned hopefully to Michael. But Michael avoided Greg's stare.

"I'm with Bird." Michael said, avoiding Greg's stare by staring at the camera.

Since it was just about dinnertime, the playground was nearly deserted. A few little kids were on the swings at the other end. Two kids were riding their bikes around and around the soccer field.

"I thought maybe you guys would come with me." Greg said, disappointed. He kicked up a clump of grass with his sneaker before

raising the camera. "I know it's what I have to do. I have to put it back where I found it."

"No way." Bird repeated, shaking his head. "I'm not going back to the Coffman house. Once was enough."

"Chicken?" Greg angrily asked.

"Yeah." Bird quickly admitted.

"You don't have to take it back." Michael argued, pulling himself up the side of the bleachers, climbing onto the third deck of seats, then lowering himself to the ground.

"What do you mean?" Greg impatiently asked, kicking at the grass.

"Just toss it, Greg." Michael answered, making a throwing motion with one hand. "Heave it. Throw it in the trash somewhere."

"Yeah. Or leave it right here." Bird suggested, reaching for the camera. "Give it to me. I'll hide it under the seats."

"You don't understand." Greg said, swinging the camera out of Bird's reach. "Throwing it away won't do any good."

"Why not?" Bird asked, making another swipe for the camera.

"Spidey'll just come back for it." Greg said. "He'll come back to my room looking for it. He'll come after me. I know it."

"But what if we get caught taking it back?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. What if Spidey's there in the Coffman house, and he catches us?" Bird asked.

"You don't understand." Greg cried. "He knows where I live! He was at my house. He was in my room! He wants his camera back, and-"

"Here. Give it to me. We don't have to go back to that house. He can find it. Right here." Bird said as he tried to grab the camera again. But Greg held tightly to the strap and tried to tug it away. Yet Bird grabbed the side of the camera.

"No!" Greg cried out as it flashed, then whirred with a square of film sliding out a second later.

"You took my picture!" Greg said, horrified as the white square began to develop. His hands trembling, Greg pulled the snapshot from the camera and wondered what it would show.

"Sorry." Bird said. "I didn't mean to-"

But before he could finish his sentence, a voice interrupted him from behind the bleachers.

"Hey, what've you got there?" Greg looked up from the developing snapshot in surprise. Two tough-looking boys stepped out of the shadows, their expressions hard, their eyes on the camera.

Greg recognized them immediately. Joey Ferris and Mickey Ward - two ninth-graders who hung out together, always swaggering around, acting tough, and picking on kids younger than them. Their specialty was taking kids' bikes, riding off on them, and dumping them somewhere. There was a rumor around school that Mickey had once beaten up a kid so badly that the kid was disabled for life. But Greg believed Mickey made up that rumor and spread it himself.

Both boys were big for their age. Neither of them did very well in school. And even though they liked terrorizing little kids and getting into fights, they were always stealing bikes and skateboards, and neither of them ever seemed to get into serious trouble. Joey had short blond hair, slicked straight up, and wore a diamondlike stud in one ear. Mickey had a round, red face full of pimples, stringy black hair down to his shoulders, and was working a toothpick between his teeth. Both boys were wearing heavy metal T-shirts and jeans.

"Hey, I've gotta get home." Bird quickly said, half-stepping, half-dancing away from the bleachers.

"Me, too." Michael said, unable to keep the fear from showing on his face. Greg tucked the snapshot into his jeans pocket.

"Hey, you found my camera." Joey said, grabbing it out of Greg's hand. His small, gray eyes burned into Greg's as if searching for a reaction. "Thanks, man."

"Give it back, Joey." Greg said with a sigh.

"Yeah. Don't take that camera." Mickey told his friend, a smile spreading over his round face. "It's mine!"

"Give it back. Greg angrily said, reaching out his hand. Then he softened his tone. "Come on, guys. It isn't mine."

"I know it isn't yours." Mickey said, grinning. "Because it's mine!"

"I have to give it back to the owner." Greg told him, trying not to whine.

"No, you don't. I'm the owner now." Mickey said.

"Haven't you ever heard of finders keepers?" Joey asked, leaning over Greg menacingly. He was about six inches taller than Greg and much more muscular.

"Hey, let him have the thing." Michael whispered in Greg's ear. "You wanted to get rid of it, right?"

"No!" Greg protested.

"What's your problem, Freckle Face?" Joey asked Michael, eyeing him up and down.

"No problem." Michael meekly said.

"Hey, say cheese !" Mickey said, aiming the camera at Joey.

"Don't do it." Bird interrupted, waving his hands frantically.

"Why not?" Joey demanded.

"Because your face will break the camera." Bird said, laughing.

"You're really funny." Joey sarcastically said, narrowing his eyes threateningly as he raised a fist. "You want that stupid smile to be permanent?

"I know this kid. Thinks he's hot stuff." Mickey told Joey, pointing at Bird.

Both boys stared hard at Bird, trying to scare him. Bird swallowed hard, took a step back, and bumped into the bleachers.

"No, I don't. I don't think I'm hot stuff." Bird said. "I don't think I'm hot stuff."

"He looks like something I stepped in yesterday." Joey said, causing him and Mickey to laugh like hyenas and slap each other before hi-fiving.

"Listen, guys. I really need the camera back." Greg said, reaching out a hand to take it. "It isn't any good, anyway. It's broken. And it doesn't belong to me."

"Yeah, that's right. It's broken."Michael said, nodding his head.

"Yeah. Right." Mickey said sarcastically, raising the camera and aiming it at Joey. "Let's just see."

"Really, guys. I need it back." Greg desperately said. He knew if they took a photo, they would discover the camera's secret. They would learn it would take snapshots of the future where only bad things happened. They would realize the camera was evil and possibly even caused evil.

"Say cheese." Mickey said.

"Just snap the stupid thing!" Joey said, getting impatient.

'No. I can't let this happen. I've got to return the camera to the Coffman house, to Spidey.' Greg thought. Impulsively, Greg leaped forward, and with a cry, he snatched the camera away from Mickey's face.

"Hey!" Mickey reacted in surprise.

"Let's go!" Greg shouted to Bird and Michael. And without another word, the three friends turned and ran across the deserted playground toward their homes. His heart thudded in his chest; Greg gripped the camera tightly and ran as fast as he could, his sneakers pounding over the dry grass.

'They're going to catch us.' Greg thought, panting as he raced toward the street. *'They're going to catch us and pound us. They're going to take back the camera. We're dead meat. Dead meat.'*

Greg and his friends didn't turn around until they were across the street. Breathing noisily, they looked back - and cried out in relieved surprise. Joey and Mickey hadn't budged from beside the bleachers. They hadn't chased after them. They were leaning against the bleachers, laughing.

"Catch you later, guys !" Joey called after them.

"Yeah. Later." Mickey repeated before they both burst out laughing as if they said something hilarious.

"That was close." Michael said, still breathing hard.

"They mean it." Bird said, looking very troubled. "They'll catch us later. We're history."

"Tough talk. They're just a lot of hot air."Greg insisted.

"Oh, yeah?" Michael cried. "Then why did we run like that?"

"Because we're late for dinner." Bird joked. "See you guys. I'm gonna catch it if I don't hurry.

"But the camera." Greg reminded, tightly gripping the camera.

"It's too late." Michael said, nervously raking a hand back through his red hair.

"Yeah. We'll have to do it tomorrow or something." Bird agreed.

"Then you guys will come with me?" Greg asked eagerly.

"Uh. I've gotta go." Bird said without answering.

"Me, too." Michael said quickly, avoiding Greg's stare. All three of them turned their eyes back to the playground. Joey and Mickey had disappeared. They're probably off to terrorize some other kids.

"Later." Bird said, slapping Greg on the shoulder as he headed away.

The three friends split up, running in different directions across lawns and driveways, heading home. Greg had run all the way to his front yard before he remembered the snapshot he had shoved into his jeans pocket.

He stopped in the driveway and pulled it out. The sun was lowering behind the garage. He held the snapshot up close to his face to see it clearly.

"Oh, no!" he cried. "I don't believe it!"

Real World

"What happened to those two kids?" Nora asked, knuckles white.

"Oooh." Roman said, scratching the back of his head uncomfortably.

"Let's just say they picked on some pumpkin-headed people. And now are no longer with us or on Remnant." Neo added, confusing the others.

"What does that mean?" Weiss asked.

"Jaune will explain it once he returns." Roman said before coughing into his fist. "But back to the story. As Greg stared at the photo, he shouted that it was impossible."

Story

How had Shari gotten into the photo?'

It had been taken a few minutes before, in front of the bleachers on the playground. But there was Shari, standing close beside him. Greg studied the photo, his hand trembling and mouth hanging open in disbelief. It was very clear, very sharp. There they were on the playground. He could see the baseball diamond in the background.

And there they were. Greg and Shari. Shari was standing so clear, so sharp- right next to him. And they were both staring straight ahead, their eyes wide, their mouths open, their expressions are frozen in horror as a large shadow covered them both.

"Shari?" Greg cried, lowering the snapshot and darting his eyes over the front yard. " Are you here? Can you hear me?"

Silence. Greg tried again.

"Shari? Are you here?"

"Greg!" A voice shouted, causing Greg to spin around while letting out a startled cry.

"Huh?"

"Greg!" The voice repeated. It took him a while to realize that his mother was calling him from the front door.

"Oh. Hi, Mom." Greg, feeling dazed, slipped the photo into his jack before running to the front.

"Where've you been?" His mother asked. "I heard about Shari. I've been so upset. I didn't know where you were."

"Sorry, Mom." Greg said, kissing her on the cheek. "I- I should've left a note."

He stepped into the house, feeling strange and out-of-sorts, sad and confused and frightened, all at the same time.

Two Days Later

It was a gloomy day. There were gray clouds, the air was hot, and it was smoggy. School had just finished, and Greg was pacing in his room. The house was empty except for him. Terry had gone off a few hours before to his after-school job at the Dairy Freeze. Mrs. Banks had driven to the hospital to pick up Greg's dad, who was finally coming home.

Greg knew he should be happy about his dad's return. But too many things were troubling him, tugging at his mind, frightening him. For one thing, Shari still hadn't been found. The police were completely baffled. Their new theory was that she'd been kidnapped. Her frantic, grieving parents waited at home by the phone. But no kidnappers called to demand a ransom.

There were no clues of any kind. Greg could do nothing but wait and hope. As the days passed, Greg felt more and more guilty. He was sure Shari hadn't been kidnapped. He knew that somehow the camera had made her disappear. But Greg couldn't tell anyone else what he believed.

No one would believe him. Anyone Greg tried to tell the story to would think he was crazy. Cameras can't be evil, after all. Cameras can't make people fall down stairs. Or crash their cars. Or vanish from sight. Cameras can only record what they see. Greg stared out

of his window, pressing his forehead against the glass, looking down on Shari's backyard.

"Shari. Where are you ?" He asked, staring at the tree where she had posed.

The camera was still hidden in the secret compartment in his headboard. Neither Bird nor Michael would agree to help Greg return it to the Coffman house. Besides, Greg had decided to hold on to it a while longer in case he needed it as proof. In case he decided to confide his fears about it to someone.

His other fear was that Spidey would come back, back to Greg's room, back for the camera. He had so much to be frightened about but very little he could do. Greg pushed himself away from the window. He had spent so much time in the past few days staring at Shari's empty backyard.

Thinking. Thinking.

With a sigh, Greg reached into the headboard and pulled out two of the snapshots he had hidden in there along with the camera. The two snapshots were the ones taken the past Saturday at Shari's birthday party. Holding one in each hand, Greg stared at them, hoping he could see something new, something he hadn't noticed before. But the photos hadn't changed. They still showed her tree, her backyard, green in the sunlight. And no Shari. No one where Shari had been standing. It was as if the lens had penetrated right through her.

Staring at the photos, Greg let out a cry of anguish. If only he had never gone into the Coffman house. If only he had never stolen the camera.

If only he had never taken any photos with it.

If only ... if only . . . if only . . .

Before Greg realized what he was doing, he was ripping the two snapshots into tiny pieces. Panting loudly, his chest heaving, he tore at the snapshots and let the pieces fall to the floor. When he had ripped them both into tiny shards of paper, he flung himself facedown on his bed and closed his eyes, waiting for his heart to stop pounding and the heavy feeling of guilt and horror to lift.

Two Hours Later

"Shari. Is it really you?" Greg shouted into the phone, hardly believing the voice.

"Yeah. It's me!" She sounded as surprised as he did.

"But how? I mean-" Greg asked, his mind racing. He didn't know what to say.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Hold on a minute." Shari told him. And he heard her step away from the phone to talk to her mother. "Mom. Stop crying already. Mom. It's really me. I'm home."

A few seconds later, she came back on the line.

"I've been home for two hours, and Mom's still crying and carrying on."

"I feel like crying, too." Greg admitted. "I-I just can't believe it! Shari, where were you?"

"I don't know." She answered after a few moments.

"Huh?"

"I really don't. It was just so weird, Greg. One minute there I was at my birthday party. The next minute, I was standing in front of my house. And it was two days later. But I don't remember being away or being anywhere else. I don't remember anything at all."

"You don't remember going away? Or coming back?" Greg asked.

"No. Nothing." Shari said, her voice trembling. "Shari, those pictures I took of you? With the weird camera? You were invisible in them."

"And then I disappeared." She said, finishing his thought.

"Shari, do you think?"

"I don't know." she replied quickly. "I-I have to get off now. The police are here. They want to question me. What am I going to tell them? They're going to think I had amnesia or flipped out or something."

"I- I don't know." Greg said, completely bewildered. "We have to talk about the camera."

"I can't now. Maybe tomorrow. Okay?" She said before shouting to her mother that she was coming. "Bye, Greg. See you."

And then she hung up.

Greg replaced the receiver but sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the phone for a long time. Shari was back. She'd been back about two hours. Two hours. Two hours. Two hours. He turned his eyes to the clock radio beside the phone. Just two hours before, he had ripped up the two snapshots of an invisible Shari.

His mind whirred with wild ideas, insane ideas. Had he brought Shari back by ripping up the photos? Did this mean that the camera caused her to disappear? That the camera caused all of the terrible things that showed up in its snapshots? Greg stared at the phone for a long time, think ng hard. He knew what he had to do. He had to talk to Shari. And they had to return the camera.

Next Day

Greg met Shari on the playground the following afternoon. The sun floated high in a cloudless sky. Eight or nine kids were engaged in a noisy brawl of a soccer game, running one way, then the other across the outfield of the baseball diamond.

"Hey. You look like you!" Greg exclaimed as Shari came jogging up to where he stood beside the bleachers. He pinched her arm. "Yeah. It's you."

"I feel fine. Just confused. And tired. The police asked me questions for hours. And when they finally went away, my parents started to cry again. Sorry, Greg." She told him, rubbing her arm while staring down at his sneakers. She then rested her back against the side of the bleachers, shaking her head. "I think Mom and Dad believe somehow it's my fault that I disappeared."

"It's the camera's fault." Greg muttered before raising his eyes to hers. "The camera is evil."

"Maybe. I don't know what to think. I really don't." Shari shrugged. Greg showed her the snapshot, the one showing the two of them on the playground staring in horror as a shadow crept over them. "How weird."

"I want to take the camera back to the Coffman house." Greg said heatedly. "I can go home and get it now. Will you help me? Will you come with me?"

Shari started to reply but stopped. They both saw the dark shadow move, sliding toward them quickly, silently, over the grass. And then they saw the man dressed all in black, his spindly legs pumping hard as he approached them.

Spidey!

Greg grabbed Shari's hand, frozen in fear. He and Shari gaped in terror as Spidey's slithering shadow crept over them. Greg had a shudder of recognition. He knew the snapshot had just come true. As the dark figure of Spidey moved toward them like a black tarantula, Greg pulled Shari's hand.

"Run!" Greg shouted.

He didn't have to say it. They were both running now, gasping as they ran across the grass toward the street. Their sneakers thudded loudly on the ground as they reached the sidewalk and kept running. Greg turned to see Spidey closing the gap.

"He's catching up!"

Spidey, his face still hidden in the shadows of his black baseball cap, moved with startling speed, his long legs kicking high as he pursued them.

"He's going to catch us!" Greg cried, feeling as if his chest were about to burst. "He's ... too fast!"

Spidey moved even closer, his shadow scuttling over the grass.

Closer.

When the car horn honked, Greg screamed. He and Shari stopped short. The horn blasted out again. Greg turned to see a familiar young man inside a small hatchback. It was Jerry Norman, who lived across the street.

"Is this man chasing you?" Jerry asked, lowering his car window. Without waiting for an answer, he backed the car towards Spidey. "I'm calling the cops, mister!"

Spidey didn't reply. Instead, he turned and darted across the street.

"I'm warning you!" Jerry shouted. But Spidey had disappeared behind a tall hedge. "Are you kids okay?"

"Yeah. Fine." Greg managed to say, still breathing hard, his chest heaving.

"We're okay. Thanks, Jerry." Shari said.

"I've seen that guy around the neighborhood." Jerry said, staring through the windshield at the tall hedge. "Never thought he was

dangerous. You kids want me to call the police?"

"No. It's okay." Greg replied. *'As soon as I give him back his camera, he'll stop chasing us.'*

"Well, be careful, okay?" Jerry said, studying their faces as if trying to determine how frightened and upset they were. "You need a lift home or anything?"

"We'll be okay." Greg said as he and Shari shook their heads. "Thanks."

Jerry warned them once again to be careful, then drove off, his tires squealing as he turned the corner.

"That was close." Shari said, her eyes on the hedge. "Why was Spidey chasing us?"

"He thought I had the camera. He wants it back." Greg answered. " Meet me tomorrow, okay? In front of the Coffman house. Help me put it back?"

Shari stared at him without replying, her expression thoughtful and wary.

"We're going to be in danger - all of us - until we put that camera back." Greg insisted.

"Okay." Shari said quietly. "Tomorrow."

The Next Day

Something scurried through the tall weeds of the unmowed front lawn.

"What was that? It was too big to be a squirrel." Shari cried, whispering even though no one else was in sight. She lingered behind Greg, who stopped to look up at the Coffman house.

"Maybe it was a raccoon or something." Greg said, gripping the camera tightly in both hands.

It was a little after three o'clock the next afternoon, a hazy, overcast day. Mountains of dark clouds threatening rain were rolling across the sky, stretching behind the house, casting it in shadow.

"It's going to storm." Shari said, staying close behind Greg. "Let's get this over with and go home."

"Good idea." He said, glancing up at the heavy sky.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, a low roar. The old trees that dotted the front yard whispered and shook.

"We can't just run inside." Greg said, watching the sky darken. "First, we have to make sure. Spidey isn't there."

Making their way quickly through the tall grass and weeds, they stopped at the living room window and peered inside. Thunder rumbled, low and long, in the distance. Greg thought he saw another creature scuttle through the weeds around the corner of the house.

"It's too dark in there. I can't see a thing." Shari said.

"Let's check out the basement." Greg suggested. "That's where Spidey hangs out, remember?"

The sky darkened to an eerie gray-green as they made their way to the back of the house and dropped to their knees to peer down through the basement windows at ground level. Squinting through the dust-covered window panes, they could see the makeshift, plywood table Spidey had made, the wardrobe against the wall, its doors still open, the colorful, old clothing spilling out, the empty frozen food boxes scattered on the floor.

"No sign of him." Greg whispered, cradling the camera in his arm as if it might try to escape from him if he didn't hold it tightly. "Let's get

moving."

"Are you sure?" Shari stammered. She wanted to be brave. But the thought that she had disappeared for two days - completely destroyed any chance of that happening. *'Michael and Bird were chickens. But maybe they were the smart ones. She wished this were over. All over.'*

A few seconds later, Greg and Shari pushed open the front door. They stepped into the darkness of the front hall. They stopped and listened. And then they both jumped at the sound of the loud, sudden crash directly behind them.

"It's just the door! The wind!" Shari said, regaining her voice. A gust of wind had made the front door slam.

"Let's get this over with." Greg whispered, badly shaken.

"We never should've broken into this house in the first place." Shari whispered as they made their way on tiptoe, step by creaking step, down the dark hallway toward the basement stairs.

"It's a little late for that." Pulling open the door to the basement steps, Greg stopped again. "What's that banging sound upstairs?"

Shari's features tightened in fear as she heard it, too, a repeated, almost rhythmic banging.

"Shutters?" Greg suggested.

"Yeah." Shari quickly agreed, breathing a sigh of relief. "A lot of the shutters are loose, remember?"

The entire house seemed to groan. Thunder rumbled outside, closer now. They stepped onto the landing, then waited for their eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"Couldn't we just leave the camera up here and run?" Shari asked, more of a plea than a question.

"No. I want to put it back." Greg insisted.

"But, Greg-" She tugged at his arm as he started down the stairs.

"No!" He pulled out of her grasp. "He was in my room, Shari! He tore everything apart, looking for it. I want him to find it where it belongs. If he doesn't find it, he'll come back to my house. I know he will!"

"Okay, okay. Let's just hurry."

It was brighter in the basement, gray light seeping down from the four ground-level windows. Outside, the wind swirled and pushed against the windowpanes. A pale flash of lightning made shadows flicker against the basement wall. The old house groaned as if unhappy about the storm.

"What was that? Footsteps?" Shari stopped halfway across the basement and listened.

"It's just the house." Greg said, but his quivering voice betrayed him. He stopped and listened too.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The shutter high above them continued its rhythmic pounding.

"Where did you find the camera, anyway?" Shari whispered, following Greg to the far wall across from the enormous furnace with its cobwebbed ducts sprouting up like pale tree limbs.

"Over here." Greg answered. He stepped up to the worktable and reached for the vise clamped on the edge. "When I turned the vise, a door opened up. It's some kind of hidden shelf. That's where the camera-"

He cranked the handle of the vise. Once again, the door to the secret shelf popped open.

"Good." Greg whispered, flashing Shari a smile. He shoved the camera onto the shelf, tucking the carrying strap under it. Then he pushed the door closed. "We're out of here."

He felt so much better. So relieved. So much lighter. The house groaned and creaked, but Greg didn't care. Another flash of lightning, brighter this time, like a camera flash, sent shadows flickering on the wall.

"Come on." Greg whispered.

But Shari was already ahead of him, making her way carefully over the food cartons strewn everywhere, hurrying towards the steps. They were halfway up the stairs, Greg one step behind Shari, when, above them, Spidey stepped silently into view on the landing, blocking their escape. Greg blinked and shook his head as if he could shake away the image of the figure that stared darkly down at him.

"No!" Shari cried out and fell back against Greg.

He grabbed for the railing, forgetting that it had fallen under Michael's weight during their first unfortunate visit to the house. Luckily, Shari regained her balance before toppling them both down the stairs.

Lightning flashed behind them, sending a flash of white light across the stairway. But the unmoving figure on the landing above them remained shrouded in darkness.

"Let us go!" Greg finally managed to cry, finding his voice.

"Yeah. We returned your camera!" Shari added, sounding shrill and frightened.

Spidey didn't reply. Instead, he took a step towards them, onto the first step. And then he descended another step. Nearly stumbling again, Greg and Shari backed down to the basement floor. The

wooden stairs squeaked in protest as the dark figure stepped slowly, steadily, down. As Spidey reached the basement floor, a crackling bolt of lightning cast a blue light over him, and Greg and Shari saw his face for the first time.

In the brief flash of color, they saw that he was old, older than they had imagined. His eyes were small and round, like dark marbles. His mouth was small, too, pursed in a tight, menacing grimace.

"We returned the camera." Shari said, staring in fear as Spidey crept closer. "Can't we go now? Please?"

"Let me see." Spidey said. His voice was younger than his face, warmer than his eyes. "Come."

They hesitated. But he gave them no choice. Ushering them back across the cluttered floor to the worktable, he wrapped his large, spidery hand over the vise and turned the handle. The door opened. He pulled out the camera and held it close to his face to examine it.

"You shouldn't have taken it." He told them, speaking softly, turning the camera in his hands.

"We're sorry." Shari said quickly.

"Can we go now?" Greg asked, edging towards the stairs.

"It's not an ordinary camera." Spidy said, his small eyes on them.

"We know. The pictures it took. They-" Greg began but trailed off when Spidey's eyes grew wide, and his expression turned angry.

"You took pictures with it?" Spidey asked, furious.

"Just a few." Greg answered, wishing he had kept his mouth shut. "They didn't come out. Really."

"You know about the camera, then." Spidey said, moving quickly to the center of the floor.

'Is he trying to block our escape?' Greg wondered. "It's broken or something."

"It's not broken. It's evil." Spidey said, motioning toward a low plywood table. "Sit there."

Shari and Greg exchanged glances. Then, reluctantly, they sat down on the edge of the board, sitting stiffly, nervously, their eyes darting towards the stairway, towards escape.

"The camera is evil." Spidey said, standing over them, holding the camera in both hands. "I should know. I helped to create it."

"You're an inventor?" Greg asked, glancing at Shari, who was nervously tugging at a strand of her black hair.

"I'm a scientist. Or, I should say, I was a scientist. My name is Fredericks. Dr. Fritz Fredericks." Spidey corrected as he transferred the camera from one hand to another. "My lab partner invented this camera. It was his pride and joy. More than that, it would have made him a fortune. Would have, are the key terms."

"What happened to him? Did he die?" Shari asked, still fiddling with the strand of hair.

"No. Worse. I stole the invention from him. I stole the plans and the camera. I was evil, you see. I was young and greedy. So very greedy. And I wasn't above stealing to make my fortune." Dr. Fredericks snickered before pausing and eyeing them both as if waiting for them to say something, perhaps to offer their disapproval of him. But he continued his story when Greg and Shari remained silent, staring up at him from the low plywood table. Spidey then gained a sad smile on his face before coughing into his hand. "When I stole the camera, it caught my partner by surprise. Unfortunately, from then on, all of the surprises were mine. My partner, you see, was much more evil than I was."

Dr. Fredericks coughed into his hand, then began to pace in front of Greg and Shari as he talked, speaking softly, slowly, as if remembering the story for the first time in a long while.

"My partner was a truly evil one. He dabbled in the dark arts. I should correct myself. He didn't just dabble. He was quite a master of it all." Spidey held up the camera, waving it above his head, then lowering it. "My partner put a curse on the camera. If he couldn't profit from it, he wanted to make sure that I never would, either. And so he put a curse on it."

He turned his gaze on Greg, leaning over him.

"Do you know about how some primitive peoples fear the camera? They fear the camera because they believe it will steal their soul if it takes their picture." He patted the camera. "Well, this camera really does steal souls."

Staring up at the camera, Greg shuddered. The camera had stolen Shari away. Would it have stolen all of their souls?

"People have died because of this camera. People close to me. That is how I came to learn of the curse and the camera's evil. And then I learned something just as frightening. The camera cannot be destroyed." Dr. Fredericks said, uttering a slow, sad sigh. He coughed, cleared his throat noisily, and began to pace in front of them again. "And so I vowed to keep the camera a secret. To keep it away from people so it cannot do its evil. I lost my job. My family. I lost everything because of it. But I am determined to keep the camera where it can do no harm."

He stopped pacing with his back towards them. He stood silently, shoulders hunched, lost in thought. Greg quickly climbed to his feet and motioned for Shari to do the same.

"Well ... uh ... I guess it's good we returned it." Greg said hesitantly. "Sorry we caused so much trouble."

"Yeah, we're very sorry." Shari repeated sincerely. "Guess it's back in the right hands."

"Goodbye." Greg said, starting towards the steps. "It's getting late, and we-"

"No!" Dr. Fredericks shouted, startling them both. He moved quickly to block the way. "I'm afraid you can't go. You know too much."

Real World

"Wait. So Dr. Fredericks's partner invented the camera, and Spidey stole it." Pyrrha said.

"Yes." Roman answered.

"Is Spidey's partner still alive?" Weiss asked.

"Not sure. We searched high and low for him. But we found nothing. Our best guess is the camera did something to him." Neo answered.

"Is it true that the camera can steal people's souls?" Velvet asked, now even more worried for Jaune.

"That's a tough one. We don't have any concrete proof. While some others did run some tests, the results were inconclusive." Roman answered. "Alright. No more questions. We're almost finished. I can never let you leave, Dr. Frederick declared, the flash of lightning lighting up his face."

Story

Dr. Fredericks crossed his bony arms in front of his black sweatshirt.

"But we won't tell anyone." Greg said, his voice rising until the words became a plea.

"Really. Your secret is good with us." Shari insisted, her frightened eyes on Greg. Dr. Fredericks stared at them menacingly but didn't reply.

"You can trust us." Greg said, his voice quivering. He cast a frightened glance at Shari.

"Besides." Shari said, "Even if we did tell anyone, who would believe us?"

"Enough talk." Dr. Fredericks snapped. "It won't do you any good. I've worked too long and too hard to keep the camera a secret."

A rush of wind pushed against the windows, sending up a low howl. The wind carried a drumroll of rain. The sky through the basement windows was as black as night.

"You can't keep us here forever!" Shari cried, unable to keep the growing terror from her voice. The rain pounded against the windows now, a steady downpour. Dr. Fredericks drew himself up straight and seemed to grow taller. His tiny eyes burned into Shari's.

"I'm so sorry." Dr. Frederick said, his voice a whisper of regret. "So sorry. But I have no choice."

He took another step towards them. Greg and Shari exchanged frightened glances. From where they stood, in front of the low plywood table in the center of the basement, the steps seemed a hundred miles away.

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Greg asked, shouting over a burst of thunder that rattled the basement windows.

"Please! Don't!" Shari begged. Dr. Fredericks moved forward with surprising speed. Holding the camera in one hand, he grabbed Greg's shoulder with the other.

"No! "Greg screamed. "Let go!"

"Let go of him!" Shari screamed before realizing that both of Dr. Frederick's hands were occupied. *'This may be my only chanc* e.'

Shari took a deep breath and lunged forward. Dr. Fredericks' eyes bulged, and he cried out in surprise as Shari grabbed the camera with both hands and pulled it away from him. He made a frantic grab for the camera, and Greg burst free. Before the desperate man could take another step, Shari raised the camera to her eye and pointed the lens at him.

"NO! Don't push the button !" Dr. Frederick shouted. He lurched forward, his eyes wild, and grabbed the camera with both hands. Greg stared in horror as Shari and Dr. Fredericks grappled, both holding onto the camera, each trying desperately to wrestle it away from the other.

FLASH!

The bright burst of light startled them all. Shari grabbed the camera.

"Run!" Shari screamed after grabbing the camera.

The basement became a whirring blur of grays and blacks as Greg hurtled himself toward the stairs. He and Shari ran side by side, slipping over the food cartons and jumping over tin cans and empty bottles. Rain thundered against the windows. The wind howled, pushing against the glass. They could hear Dr. Fredericks' anguished screams behind them.

"Did it take our picture or his?" Shari asked.

"I don't know. Just hurry!" Greg screamed as Dr. Frederick howled like an animal, competing with the rain and wind pushing at the windows. The stairs weren't that far away. But it seemed to take forever to reach them.

Forever.

'Forever.' Greg thought. Dr. Fredericks wanted to keep Shari and him down there forever. Panting loudly, they both reached the dark stairway. A deafening clap of thunder made them stop and turn around. "Huh?"

To his shock, Dr. Fredericks hadn't chased after them. And his anguished cries had stopped. The basement was silent.

"What's going on?" Shari cried breathlessly.

Squinting back into the darkness, it took Greg a while to realize that the dark, rumpled form lying on the floor in front of the worktable was Dr. Fredericks.

"What happened?" Shari cried, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. Still clinging to the camera strap, she gaped in surprise at the old man's still body, sprawled on its back on the floor.

"I don't know." Greg replied in a breathless whisper.

Reluctantly, Greg started back towards Dr. Fredericks. Following close behind, Shari uttered a low cry of horror when she clearly saw the fallen man's face. Eyes bulged out, the mouth open in a twisted O of terror, the face stared up at them.

Frozen.

Dead.

Dr. Fredericks was dead.

"What happened?" Shari finally managed to say, swallowing hard, forcing herself to turn away from the ghastly, tortured face.

"I think he died of fright." Greg answered, squeezing her shoulder and not even realizing it.

"Huh? Fright?" Shari asked, confused.

"He knew better than anyone what the camera could do." Greg explained. "When you snapped his picture, I think . . . I think it scared him to death!"

"I only wanted to throw him off-guard." Shari cried. "I only wanted to give us a chance to escape. I didn't think-"

"The picture." Greg interrupted. "Let's see the picture."

Shari raised the camera. The photo was still half - inside the camera. Greg pulled it out with a trembling hand. He held it up so they could both see it.

"Wow." Greg exclaimed quietly. "Wow."

The photo showed Dr. Fredericks lying on the floor, his eyes bulging, his mouth frozen open in horror. It was freight that killed Dr. Frederick. The camera had claimed another victim. This time, forever.

"What do we do now?" Shari asked, staring down at the figure sprawled at their feet.

"First, I'm putting this camera back." Greg said, taking it from her and shoving it back on its shelf. He turned the vise handle, and the door to the secret compartment closed. Greg breathed a sigh of relief. Hiding the dreadful camera away made him feel so much better. "Now, let's go home and call the police."

Two Days Later

It was a cool, bright day with a gentle breeze rustling the trees. The four friends stopped at the curb, leaning on their bikes, and stared up at the Coffman house. Even in bright sunlight, the old trees that surrounded the house covered it in the shade.

"So you didn't tell the police about the camera?" Bird asked, staring up at the dark, empty front window.

"No. They wouldn't believe it." Greg answered. "Besides, the camera should stay locked up forever. Forever! I hope no one ever finds out about it."

"We told the police we ran into the house to get out of the rain." Shari added. "And we said we started to explore while we waited for the storm to blow over. And we found the body in the basement."

"What did Spidey die of?" Michael asked, gazing up at the house.

"The police said it was heart failure." Greg told him. "But we know the truth."

"Wow. I can't believe one old camera could do so much evil." Bird said.

"I believe it." Greg said quietly.

"Let's get out of here." Michael urged. He raised his sneakers to the pedals and started to roll away. "This place really creeps me out."

The other three followed, pedaling away in thoughtful silence. They had turned the corner and were heading up the next block when two figures emerged from the back door of the Coffman house. Joey Ferris and Mickey Ward stepped over the weed-choked lawn onto the driveway.

"Those jerks aren't too bright." Joey said.

"They never even saw us the other day. Never saw us watching them through the basement window." Mickey laughed. "Yeah. They're jerks."

"They couldn't hide this camera from us. No way, man." Joey said as he raised the camera and examined it.

"Take my picture." Mickey said. "Come on. Let's try it out."

"Yeah. Okay." Joey raised the viewfinder to his eye. "Say cheese."

A click. A flash. A whirring sound.

Joey pulled the snapshot from the camera, and both boys eagerly huddled around it, waiting to see what developed.

Real World

"And that's that." Roman said.

"Damn." The others said.

"Wait. I thought you said those boys met their ends from some pumpkin head people?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"They did. The camera brought them somehow. Don't try to understand it. Remember, it's dark arts." Neo answered.

"So all these stories are true and happened." Yang said.

"That's right." Roman said before feeling his scroll ring. Taking it out, he saw that he had received a message and opened it. "Okay. Some workers found Jaune."

"That's great." Pyrrha said.

"Where is he?" Velvet asked.

"In Mistral. They're currently bringing him back here. But it's going to take an hour." Roman answered.

"That's good." Velvet said, sighing in relief.

"But I have to ask. With all the trouble it can cause, shouldn't it be in a secure location and not a mask shop?" Coco asked.

"It was. But it's hard to keep it in one location for various reasons. But that leads me to this. This story wasn't the only major incident. Two more stories follow this that show what the camera can do. And it's best to tell you them." Roman said, opening the book again.

"Plus. It will let us kill some time until Jaune returns. We also need to ask him some questions." Roman added. "Alright. Let's begin with the second story of the camera. Say Cheese and Die-Again!"

Notes:

Next Chapter: Say Cheese and Die—Again!

Following Chapter: Say Cheese and Die Screaming.

Chapter 8

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 8: Say Cheese and Die Again

***Note: Just a quick note/heads up. While the story Say Cheese and Die was in third person, Say Cheese and Die Again is surprisingly in first person.**

"Does this story involve the same people or not?" Velvet asked.

"Yes. It involves Greg, Shari, Bird, and Michael." Roman answered.

"So they find the camera again. How long has it been since they returned the camera and indirectly killed Spidey?" Blake asked.

"The previous story takes place at the end of July. This one takes place in winter." Neo answered.

"Wow." Coco said, surprised.

"How did they encounter the camera this time?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Or did Spidy somehow return?" Ren asked.

"That actually coincides with this story's message. And the reason why Spidey wanted to keep Shari and Greg as prisoners in the Coffman house." Roman answered.

"You mean how they knew too much about the camera?" Pyrrha asked, confused.

"Yes. And you'll soon see why." Roman said as he flipped through the correct page. "A cold shiver ran down his spine when Greg heard his teacher, Mr. Saur, shout his name. GREG BANK!"

Story

Greg had been slumping low in my seat in the last row of the classroom, trying to hide behind Brian Webb, the big gorilla of a kid who sat in front of me. And he folded his hands and prayed that Mr. Saur wouldn't call on him to give his report next.

"Greg Banks!" He shouted.

Greg felt another cold shiver, followed by his legs starting to shake as he climbed to his feet. He hated giving reports in front of the whole class, especially when he hadn't had much time to practice, especially when he was not allowed to have notes. Unforutnly, half of his English grade depended on how he did on that report. Clearing his throat, Greg made his way to the front of the class.

But when he was halfway there, Donny Greene stuck his big white sneaker into the aisle and tripped him. Greg stumbled but didn't fall, but the whole class exploded in laughter either way.

"Donny, do you have to trip every person who walks by you ?" Mr. Saur asked.

"Yes." Donny replied with a straight face, and once again, the whole class burst out laughing.

Everyone thinks Donny is a riot, everyone but Mr. Saur. Mr. Saur doesn't think anyone is funny. That's why we call him Sourball Saur. He probably wouldn't think that was funny, either! Mr. Saur is tall and thin and nearly bald. He never kids around. He never smiles. His mouth is always puckered as if he's just bitten into a lemon. He's sort of a legend at Pitts Landing Middle School. Everyone tries not to get him. My best friends, Michael, Bird, and Shari, were lucky. They're in Miss Folsom's class. I was the only one who got stuck with the Sourball.

I wondered if everyone could see my knees shaking as I cleared my throat. My face felt burning hot, and my hands were cold as ice.

Does everyone get this nervous when they stand in front of the class?

Mr. Saur folded his pale, skinny hands on his desk and cracked his knuckles.

"Okay, Greg, let's hear your true story." Mr. Saur said. I cleared my throat for the thousandth time and took a deep breath. Then I started to tell the story of what happened to my friends and me last summer.

"I was hanging out with my friends, Bird, Michael, and Shari. We had nothing to do, and we were kind of bored. So we dared each other to do something exciting. We dared each other to sneak into the Coffman house.

"What's the Coffman house?" Mr. Saur raised a hand to interrupt me. He frowned his sour frown.

"It's a haunted house!" Donny Greene called out.

"It's where Donny lives!" Brian Webb mumbled, loud enough for everyone to hear, earning a big laugh from everyone. Mr. Saur raised both hands for quiet and gave everyone his lemon expression.

"It's a deserted, old house in my neighborhood." I explained. "We went inside and down to the basement, where we found an old camera. And that's what my true story is about because the camera had evil powers."

Mr. Saur groaned and rolled his eyes. Some kids laughed. But I took another deep breath and continued my story.

"It was an instant camera. The picture popped right out, but it was never the picture we snapped. It always showed something terrible happening. I took the old camera home and snapped a photo of my dad's new station wagon. The picture slid out, and in the image, the station wagon was totaled, completely wrecked. And then, a few days later, my dad was in a terrible accident. The photo came true."

I glanced around the room to see how my story was going over with the class. A few kids were laughing. Others were staring at me hard, Trying to decide if I was for real. Brian Webb tried to make me lose it. He stuck his two pointer fingers into his nostrils and twirled them around. He thinks he's funny, but he's just gross.

"I took a snapshot of my friend Bird Arthur." I continued. "At his Little League game. Bird smiled and posed for the camera. But the photo showed him lying unconscious on the ground. Then, a few minutes later, a kid hit a line drive. It smacked Bird in the head. And Bird fell unconscious on the ground, just like in the photo."

I heard some nervous giggles from the back of the room. I glanced up to see puzzled expressions on a lot of faces. Brian still had his fingers in his nose. I turned away. No way was I going to laugh at that. Mr. Saur had his elbows on the desk and his round, bald head buried in his hands. His face was hidden. So I couldn't tell if he liked my report or not.

"Then something even scarier happened. I brought the camera to Shari Walker's birthday party. I snapped Shari's picture standing next to a tree. When the photo popped out, it showed the tree but no Shari. It was like she was invisible or something. And then, a few minutes later, Shari disappeared." I continued. A few kids gasped. Some others laughed. Mr. Saur still had his face buried in his hands. "A couple of days later, Shari came back. But now we were too frightened to keep the camera. So we took it back to the Coffman house. And we met this strange guy dressed all in black. He was the inventor of the camera. He told us that the camera had a curse on it, and-"

"That will be enough." Mr. Saur shouted, startling everyone.

"Excuse me ?" I asked, unsure I heard him correctly. The room went silent as Mr. Saur shook his head. Then he narrowed his watery brown eyes at me.

"Greg. I have some very bad news for you." He said as the lunch bell rang. "We'll hear more reports tomorrow. Class dismissed."

Chairs scraped the floor as everyone stood up. I watched the other kids gather their books and backpacks and head for the door. Freedom, I had the urge to run after them. But Mr. Saur kept his eyes locked on me, holding me in place with those cold eyes. I waited until the classroom had emptied out. Then I turned to the lemon-faced teacher.

"What's the bad news ?" I asked, gritting my teeth.

"I'm giving you an F." Sourball said.

"Huh?"

"I'm failing you on that report, Greg."

"B - but - but- why ?" I choked, feeling my knees give. I had to grab the chalk tray to keep myself from collapsing in a quivering heap on the floor. He crossed his bony arms over the front of his yellow alligator shirt. I wished the alligator would reach up and bite him.

"You didn't do the assignment." he explained.

"But-" I still gripped the chalk tray. My legs were shaking too hard to stand up.

"Greg, you were supposed to share a true story." Mr. Saur scolded. "Instead, you came in here with that wild tale. It was completely silly. I don't know what you were thinking!"

"But it's true! The camera." I wailed, but he waved a hand in my face.

"Silly." He repeated. "You came in here with a wild, silly story. Something you probably read in a comic book."

"Mr. Saur! You have to believe me. The camera is real. I didn't make up the story." I started, letting go of the chalk tray and balling my

hands into tight fists. I took a deep breath, struggling to keep my voice low and calm. "You can ask my friends. They're in Miss Folsom's class. They'll tell you it really happened."

"I'm sure they will." He smirked at me. "I'm sure your friends will tell me whatever you want them to tell me."

"No. Really!" I protested, only for Mr. Saur to shake his head.

"You didn't take the assignment seriously, Greg. You treated it like a big joke. So I have to give you an F." I raised my fists and let out a loud groan.

'Greg, get control.' I warned myself. *'Get control. But how could I get control? The grade was so unfair. And it meant so much to me. It was a matter of life or death grader.'* "Mr. Saur. You can't give me an F! You will ruin my life!"

He stared coldly at me. He didn't say a word.

"If I don't get better grades, I can't visit my cousins this summer. You see, my cousins live near Yosemite. In California. And my parents said that if I get a better grade in your English class, I can spend the summer with them."

He didn't move. His cold frown didn't budge. His eyes didn't blink.

"If you give me an F, I'll be stuck all summer in Pitts Landing!"

"Then you'll have plenty of time to make up more crazy stories." Mr. Saur said. An unpleasant smile spread over his face. His wet brown eyes flashed. He turned away from me and started scribbling notes in his black grade book.

"Mr. Saur. Please! You've got to believe me. My story is true. I didn't make it up. Please." I begged. He raised his eyes from the grade book.

"Okay. Prove it."

"Huh?" I asked, my mouth hanging open.

"Bring in the camera. Bring it in and prove that it's evil. Prove that your story is true, or else I have to fail you." He explained. I stared at him, studying his face. Was he serious? He stared back for a moment, daring me with his eyes. Then he shooed me away with both hands.

"Go to lunch, Greg. Maybe next time, you'll take my assignment seriously."

I gathered up my backpack and slung it over my shoulder. Then I slumped out of the room, thinking hard. Could I go back to that creepy old house and dig out that camera? No. No way. The camera was too dangerous. Too frightening. Too evil. But I needed a good grade. I needed it desperately, but what should I do? I found my friends at our usual table in the corner of the lunchroom. I dropped my tray down with a sigh and spilled half my drink.

"Greg, what's your problem ?" Bird asked, looking up from his sandwich. He had egg salad all over his chin and cheeks.

"Are you eating that sandwich or wearing it?" Shari asked Bird.

"Excuse me?" Bird asked, confused.

Michael inflated his brown paper sandwich bag and popped it between his hands. Then he crushed his chocolate milk carton flat. He always gulps his milk down first, then crushes the carton. We're not sure why.

Michael is a little weird.

I dropped into my chair. I didn't start to eat. I didn't even look at my food tray. I just stared at the wall until the tiles became a green blur.

"What's your problem?" Bird repeated. Now he had egg salad on his forehead, too! I don't know how he does it.

Bird's real name is Doug Arthur. But he looks so much like a bird; everyone calls him Bird, even his parents. He has small, birdlike brown eyes, close together over a long, beak-shaped nose. And he has a short tuft of feathery brown hair on top of his head. He's tall and thin and sort of bobs up and down like a flamingo when he walks.

"Bad day, Greg?" Michael asked before poking a finger through his sandwich. He always makes a hole in the center of his sandwich and eats it inside out.

"For sure." I muttered before sighing.

"Come on, Greg. Spill." Shari urged without looking as she kept pulling the bright red pepperoni off her pizza. I took a deep breath. Then I told them what had happened to me in English class.

"Sourball didn't believe you?" Bird asked, dropping his sandwich before slapping his forehead. But when he pulled away, he noticed his hands were smeared with egg salad.

"Well, we could all go tell him it's true." Shari suggested, only for me to shake my head.

"He won't believe you either."

"But we all saw it!" Michael protested. "We all know it's true."

"Yeah. It's four against one." Bird added while wiping egg salad off the front of his shirt. "He'll have to believe us."

"He won't." I sighed. "You know Sourball. He said I have to bring in the camera and prove to him that it's evil."

"But you can't! "Michael and Shari shouted. But I didn't hear what they said as I had looked over their shoulders and saw Brian and Donny grinning at me from the next table. Brian and Donny are the two biggest guys at Pitts Landing Middle School. We call them Sumo

One and Sumo Two because they're both shaped a little like sumo wrestlers.

Of course, no one has ever called them Sumo One or Sumo Two to their faces. When Donny and Brian get angry, they sit on the kids and squash them like bugs. And now, they had followed me from Mr. Saur's class and were grinning at me from the next table. When they saw me watching, they formed little square cameras with their fingers and raised them in front of their eyes.

"Click! Click!" Brian called. "I've got an evil camera here!"

"Say cheese!" Donny shouted. "Say cheese and die! Ha - ha - ha!"

"Click. Click. Click."

"Watch the birdie!" Donny cried.

"Watch the birdbrain!" Brian yelled. They both tossed back their heads and laughed like lunatics, slapping each other high fives.

"Funny, guys." I said, rolling my eyes. "Real funny."

"You two should do stand-up." Michael told them. "You should stand up in the corner!

No one laughed. No one ever laughs at Michael's jokes. His jokes are never funny. In fact, they are embarrassing. Michael has short red hair, blue eyes, and a face full of freckles. One of these days, he's going to surprise us and make a joke that isn't totally lame.

But I was in no mood for jokes, anyway. My summer was about to be ruined. My three friends all had plans to go away. No way I wanted to be left all alone in Pitts Landing with nothing to do for three months! If I had to bring in that camera to prove to Mr. Saur that I was telling the truth ... I'd do it!

"Greg - you can't," She said as if reading my thoughts as she grabbed my arm. "That camera is too dangerous."

"I'm not going back to that weird house." Bird said, shaking his head. "Never again."

"What about your brother?" Michael asked me.

"What about my brother?" I turned to him, confused.

"Isn't he working in a camera store?"

"Yeah. He's at Kramer's. He works in the developing lab. So what?"

"Maybe Terry could borrow an old camera from the store." Michael suggested. "You can bring it in and tell Mr. Saur that it's the evil camera."

"Just one problem." I told Michael. "I have to prove the camera is evil. How do I do that?"

Michael thought about it.

"It won't work. We have to go get the real camera. Who will go with me?" I asked, glancing around the table.

No one answered. Bird concentrated on getting the egg salad out from under his fingernails. Shari twisted a lock of black hair around one finger. Michael stared at the floor.

"Don't all volunteer at once." I grumbled when they still didn't move.

"I just need the camera for one day. Then we'll return it and never take it out again."

No one replied. Bird raised his beady little eyes to the ceiling and started whistling to himself. I sneered at them.

"Okay, wimps. I'll go by myself." I sneered at them.

"Don't do it." Shari warned again. "Not even for a day. Something horrible will happen. I know it will."

If only I had listened to her.

Real World

"Oh, I see it now." Coco said, shaking her head.

"What do you see?" Ruby asked.

"The meaning of the story."

"And the reason why Spidey wanted to keep Greg and Shari in the basement. Despite knowing how dangerous the camera can be, many would still be tempted to take the camera for a variety of reasons. Some for power, blackmail, or in Greg's case, to get a better grade and prove his least favorite teacher wrong." Yatsuhashi explained when he saw Ruby's confused look.

"And the meaning of the story is about how our want for something can cloud our judgment. As in the case of Greg, his desire to visit his cousin during the summer clouded his judgment where he thought the potential rewards would outweigh any harm retrieving the camera would cause." Ren added.

"Oh, I see now." Ruby said.

"Is this also how his relationship with his friends began to deteriorate?" Nora asked.

"More or less. It really began to break down a few years later. But you can think of this 'adventure' as a precursor to that." Neo answered.

"But back to the story." Roman said. "The rest of the afternoon, Greg barely heard a word. His mind was so focused on the camera that he didn't know if he took the quiz today and didn't realize he got hit with a ball during gym class."

Story

Did it hurt? Did I have to leave the game for a while?

I really don't remember.

In music class, Miss Jakes caught me staring out the window, a dazed look on my face. She thought it was because of the volleyball accident. She wanted to send me to the nurse. But I explained that I was okay. I told her I wasn't hurt - I was only daydreaming. I didn't explain that I was thinking hard, thinking about that evil camera hidden away in the Coffman house. I kept on thinking about how I was going to sneak out after dinner.

I kept on thinking about how I would ride my bike up the hill to the deserted old house, creep down to the basement and pull the camera from its hiding place in the wall.

'I'm going to prove the camera is evil, Sourball; I'm going to prove you're wrong and unfair!' I bitterly thought.

I'm going to prove it to Brian and Donny and all the other kids who laughed at my story. I'm going to get an A for my report, not an F. I thought about all that. And I thought about Shari, Michael, and Bird.

I didn't blame my friends for being scared. I was scared, too. I promised myself I'd be really careful. I'll bring it to school.

'But if I can't take anyone's picture with it, then how would I prove to Mr. Saur that the camera is evil?' I thought.

I could take a snapshot of the empty classroom. Or maybe the lunchroom or the gym when no one is there. And as soon as Mr. Saur changes my grade to an A, I'll return the camera. I'll shove it back into its hiding place. And I'll never take it out again.

After school, I searched for Shari. Since she lives next door, we usually walk home together. But I didn't see her anywhere. Crossing the street, I kicked a bottle cap to the curb as I thought hard about

what I was going to do about the camera. After about a half block, I heard someone call out to me.

"Greg! Hey! Greg!" The voice shouted as two hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around hard. It was Brian Webb!

"Greg, Donny, and I went to the Coffman house !" Brian exclaimed, grinning, holding me in place. "We found the evil camera ! ".

"Say cheese!" Donny cried as he aimed the camera and flashed it in my face. I uttered a hoarse cry and shut my eyes against the white flash.

'Something horrible is going to happen to me now.' I realized.

The picture will show me in pain, agony, and terrible trouble. And then it's going to come true! When I opened my eyes, Brian and Donny were laughing. They slapped each other a high five. I stared at the camera in Donny's hand. A yellow cardboard camera. One of those cheap throwaway cameras. Not the evil camera from the Coffman house.

"Good joke, guys!" I sarcastically said while blinking several times, trying to make the yellow dots disappear. "You guys are a riot."

"You're the funny one!" Brian shot back. "That was such a funny story you told in class!"

"Yeah. It had us all laughing." Donny added.

I stared angrily at them as my heart thumped loudly. Sumo One and Sumo Two. They were so big they nearly blocked out the sunlight! I knew they wanted to keep teasing me, have some more laughs at my expense, and maybe get into a fight. But I didn't have time to fight with them.

"Maybe you won't be laughing tomorrow." I murmured before turning around, jogging across the street, and heading for home.

A Few Hours Later

At dinner, I stared down at my plate. I was too nervous to eat. My stomach felt as if it were tied in a tight knot.

"Pass the potatoes." Terry said with a mouth full of chicken.

"It's not potatoes. It's turnips." Mom corrected, earning a shrug from Terry.

"Whatever." Terry said, scooping a pile onto his plate and spooning them into his mouth.

"Slow down, Terry." Dad scolded. "You're eating so fast; you don't know what you're eating!"

"Sure, I do. I'm eating dinner!" Terry protested, causing Mom and Dad to laugh.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Mom asked him.

"Excuse me." Terry said after burping. He then licked the chicken grease off his fingers. "I have to get back to work. A lot of special orders came in today. So I promised Mr. Kramer I'd put in a few extra hours in the developing lab."

"You're learning a lot about photography, aren't you?" Dad asked.

"Yeah. A lot."

'Oh, please!' I thought. *'Please don't talk about photography!'*

I knew that soon after dinner; I'd be sneaking out to that creepy old deserted house. I didn't want to think about cameras or photography. Terry's chair scraped the floor as he jumped to his feet. He tossed his greasy napkin onto the table.

"Got to run. See you later." Terry said as he headed for the door.

"Don't you have any homework tonight?" Mom asked.

"No." He shouted from the front hall. "They don't give homework in high school!"

"What a comedian." Dad muttered, shaking his head as Terry slammed the front door behind him. They both suddenly remembered that I was at the table, too.

"Greg. You haven't touched your chicken!" Mom said, staring at my full plate.

"I ate too much after school." I lied. "I'm not too hungry."

"Your mom and I are going over to Alana's after dinner." Dad said. Alana is Mom's sister. "Alana still isn't feeling well. Do you want to come with us?"

"Uh... no." I answered before quickly coming up with an excuse. "I've got too much homework. I'm going to be studying all night."

I never liked to lie to Mom and Dad and tried not to if I could help it. But tonight, I couldn't help it.

"How are your grades this semester?" Mom asked.

"Yes, how are they?" Dad repeated, leaning closer. "Pete and Alice out in Yosemite called me this afternoon. They asked if you are coming to visit them this summer. I told them we'd know as soon as your next report card arrives."

"Uh... I'm doing really well." I told them, staring down at my chicken and turnips and feeling my stomach knotted even tighter. *'I'll be doing really well after tomorrow.'*

"Pete and Alice said to be sure to bring a camera." Dad said as he and mom stood up to clear the table. "It's such a beautiful country out there."

"Maybe Terry can get you a good camera at the store." Mom suggested.

'Please stop talking about cameras!' I thought, gritting my teeth. "Maybe he can."

I waited till Mom and Dad drove off for Alana's house. Then I waited ten minutes more. Sometimes they forget something, turn around, and come back home. I peered out the window. Under the white moonlight, the bare trees were bending and shaking from the breezy night. It was still cold, even though spring was only a few weeks away.

I pulled a long-sleeved flannel shirt over my T-shirt, tucked a pocket flashlight into my jeans, and headed out to the garage to get my bike. The swirling wind felt heavy and wet. I glanced up at the sky, hoping it wasn't getting ready to rain. A pale half-moon floated over the quivering trees.

The front tire on my bike was a little low. But I hoped I could make it up the hill to the Coffman house. I walked the bike out of the garage, then climbed on.

I'd left all the lights on in the house. From the driveway, it looked so bright and warm, and safe. For a moment, I was tempted to go back inside and forget about the evil camera. But my mind was made up. I desperately wanted to visit my cousins this summer. No way I could do that if I got an F from Mr. Saur on my report. I took a deep breath, clicked on the bike headlight, and pedaled down to the street.

"It was lucky that Mom and Dad had to go away." I said, happy I didn't have to sneak out of the house. "That's it, Greg. Look on the bright side."

The street seemed darker than usual. Glancing up, I saw that two streetlights were out. The wind swept toward me. On both sides, the trees appeared to be shivering. I swerved to miss a sheet of old newspaper fluttering across the street. I shifted gears as the road

sloped uphill. I pictured the ramshackle old Coffman house hidden behind ancient oak trees at the top of a weed-choked lawn.

I remembered that it stood three stories tall, gray shingle, with a wraparound, screened porch, a sloping red roof, and tall chimneys on either end. Many years ago, it must have been a really fancy house. But no one had lived in it for dozens of years. And the house had crumbled and decayed until it looked like a wreck.

I crossed a street, pedaling smoothly and steadily uphill. Familiar houses rolled past in the darkness, followed by a small wooded area. I felt my throat tighten. And my hands become cold.

The Coffman house. It stood just there beyond the woods. The tree branches swayed, glowing gray - the color of bone - under the cold moonlight. I squeezed the brake as I rolled past the woods, passing the sloping lawn and the ancient oak trees, up to the old house, and gasped in shock.

The house was gone.

I jumped off my bike and let it fall to the sidewalk. I uttered a low cry of surprise. Then I blinked several times, trying to make the big, old house appear where it belonged behind the oak trees.

But no.

The trees rose up over the lawn, silvery gray in the moonlight. Now they protected only scattered piles of boards and shingles. The house had been torn down. Totaled. Dazed, I stood at the curb, staring up at where the house should be, trying to force it to return. A minute or two later, I felt a stab of pain and slapped a mosquito on my forehead.

'It's too early in the spring for mosquitoes.' I thought as I felt wet blood on my forehead. Rubbing the bite, I turned to the gravel driveway and saw a stenciled sign near the street.

SOLD.

'So the Coffman house had been sold. And the new owner tore it down.' I thought, rubbing the mosquito bite.

The house was gone. But what about the basement? What about the basement workshop? I remembered it so well. I remembered the worktable. And I remembered the hiding place in the wall above it. The small compartment where the camera lay hidden away. What about the basement?

Before I even realized it, my feet were carrying me up the hill. My sneakers slid over the slick, tall grass. I inhaled the fresh dew and kept my eyes locked on the trembling silver trees. I stepped around a pile of rusted nails and bolts and Jumped over a low stack of rotted shingles that had been pulled off the house.

Halfway up the lawn, I could see what else was left of the house. Wooden doors are stacked in a high pile with broken glass over the ground. Window frames leaning against a wall of rotting boards and cracked shingles were everywhere. A white sink was on its side against a tree, and an old washtub rested beside it.

But what about the basement? I crept closer. My legs suddenly felt heavy. My whole body felt heavy as if some invisible force were pushing me back, pushing me away from the house. A deep shadow ran along the ground behind the round, old oaks. At first glance, I thought I was staring at a pool of water that was a small lake. But as I made my way closer, I saw that the deep shadow was a hole that was a huge, square pit in the ground.

The basement.

It was nothing but a hole now.

I stopped at the edge, my body feeling even heavier. Heavy with disappointment. I stopped and stared down into the deep hole. The trees shut out most of the moonlight. With a trembling hand, I pulled

out my pocket flashlight and clicked it on. I aimed the narrow beam of yellow light into the hole.

Empty down there. The light slid over the dirt. On one side, thick tree roots poked into the open square. I ran the light over the pit walls. Tangles of roots spread over the smooth, black dirt. There was nothing left. The basement had been completely cleared out. Even the concrete floor had been broken up and carted away. But where was the camera? Where?

Had someone found it, pulled it out, and kept it? Or had it been crushed when the workers smashed the concrete? Crushed and destroyed forever? I moved the beam of light back and forth along the far wall. I'm not sure what I expected to see. Did I think I'd find the camera hidden in its square hole in the pit wall? Did I think I would see it in the corner of the muddy floor?

The light swept over dirt and knots of tree roots. But there was nothing else. I clicked off the flashlight and shoved it into my pocket. I turned away from the hole, side-stepping a pile of broken shingles. A strong gust of wind made the old trees groan and creak. I barely noticed the eerie sounds.

'I'm going to get an F.' I thought. *'The camera is gone forever, and I'm going to get an F.'*

My summer is ruined. And the other kids in class will never believe me. They will laugh at me and click cameras at me forever. I let out a long, glum sigh. Angrily, I kicked a broken board out of my path and started down the lawn to my bike. But after a couple of steps, I heard a shrill voice shout at me.

"Caught you! You're not going anywhere!" The voice said. The high voice in the night air startled me. Without thinking, I started to run before stopping.

I spun around, my heart heaving against my chest. And saw a boy about my age. He had picked up a board from the ground and held it

high as if ready to swing it. He wore a black sweatshirt over faded jeans with holes in both knees. His dark hair was cut very short. He glared at me with dark, tense eyes.

"Dad, I caught him !" The boy shouted. He had a high, shrill voice that made him sound like a little kid.

"Whoa. What do you mean?" I asked, confused. "Caught me?"

"Don't move." He demanded, raising the board higher. He took a step closer. Then another as his eyes burned hard into mine.

"I wasn't doing anything! I-I was just looking." I explained. The anger faded from his eyes. His expression changed as he stepped up to me.

"You-you're not him!" He stammered.

"Huh? Who?" I cried. "I'm not who?"

"Hey, I'm sorry." He said, shaking his head.

"Well... I'm not someone else!" I said, still confused but more so annoyed.

"I thought you were someone else."

"I'm me."

"There's a kid who lives down the block." The boy explained, scratching his dark crew cut. "He's been sneaking over here at night and stealing stuff from the yard."

"What was he stealing? There isn't much left." I asked as my eyes wandered over the cluttered lawn.

"He was taking lumber and stuff. I thought you were him." The boy said as he tossed the board away with it clattering against a pile of boards beside me.

"Did your family buy the Coffman house?" I asked, curious as I reached up and wiped the sweat off my head. Even though it was such a cool, windy night, my forehead was all sweaty.

"Yeah. We bought it. But Dad said the house was too wrecked to fix up. So he had it torn down. We're going to build a new house." He answered. The wind made the trees creak again. I glanced down the street and saw the back wheel of my bike spinning. "People told us the Coffman house was haunted. So I'm glad Dad tore it down. Anyway, my name is Jon. What's yours?"

"Greg. I- I live down at the bottom of the hill. A few blocks past the school. My friends and I used to sneak into the old house." I answered. "You know. Just for fun and excitement. I think it was haunted."

"What were you doing here? Why did you come up here tonight?" Jon asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I was looking for something." I answered. "A camera."

"An old camera?" Jon asked, scratching his head.

"Yes!"I said excitedly. "An old camera. It was hidden down in the basement. Did you see it?"

"Yeah," Jon answered. "The men dug it up when they pulled out the basement."

"Oh, wow!" I said, unable to hide my excitement. "Where is it, Jon? I mean, what did they do with it? Do you know where it is?"

"Probably over there. I don't think they emptied it yet." Jon answered, pointing over my shoulder toward the street. I spun around and saw a big Dumpster on the other side of the driveway.

"They threw it in there?" I asked. But I didn't wait for him to answer. I started running full speed through the tall weeds to the street. I

stopped in front of the big steel dumpster. I could see all kinds of junk piled over the top. "Is it okay to look for it?"

"Sure. Go ahead. Why do you want a stupid old camera, anyway ?" Jon asked as he slowly walked toward me with his hands in his pockets. I didn't answer him. There was no time for answering questions.

I lifted both hands to the top of the dumpster. It was pretty high. It took me three tries to pull myself up and inside. A street lamp across the street cast a glow of dim yellow light over the dumpster. My eyes wandered quickly over the trash. All stuff from the basement, I realized. I saw rusted old tools from the workshop. Part of an old vacuum cleaner. The spin cylinder from a dryer. Old clothes. Torn suitcases.

'Is it here? Is the camera in here?' I wondered. I pulled away a broken suitcase and tossed it aside. I grabbed stacks of old magazines and shoved them out of the way. *'I'm going to search every inch of this dumpster until I find it.'*

I pulled away a torn section of a garden hose. Then I pawed through a pile of old clothes. Where is it? Where? I dropped onto my hands and knees and dug deeper into the garbage. The stale odor of dust and decay floated up to me and swept over me. I held my breath and kept pawing away. I had to find it. I had to. I didn't stop until I saw the two eyes staring up at me.

Two eyes. Yellow in the pale light.

Staring up at me from the trash. Staring up at me without blinking.

'I'm not alone in here!' I realized. And then I opened my mouth in a shrill, terrified scream.

Real World

"Man, Greg is so desperate to get the camera." Yang said.

"That's an understatement." Weiss said.

"I mean, I get Greg's motivation. But this is too much." Ruby said.

"And he could have avoided this if he simply didn't write about the camera and wrote about anything else." Coco added, with the others nodding.

"True. But can't we give Greg some slack? He's a kid, after all." Nora asked.

"Only a little bit. But you have to remember, his father nearly died, and his friend vanished. Speaking of friends, they reminded him of how dangerous it is. But he ignored them, all so he could go visit his cousins." Neo said.

"And he said he would never use it again after showing up his teacher. But it is obvious to everyone that he would do it again if anyone doubted him." Roman added. "But anyway. Back to the story. Greg looked up and saw two cold, unblinking eyes staring at him."

Story

A chill tightened the back of my neck. I stared down at them, waiting for them to move, waiting for something to jump up at me.

"What's wrong? Did you find the camera?" Jon asked from the sidewalk.

"No. I. uh - I-"

I reached down toward the glassy yellow eyes and felt bristly fur. My heart pounding, I pushed some junk aside. And without thinking, I picked up the staring creature. Felt its body, stiff and hard beneath bristly brown and black fur.

A dead raccoon.

"Oooooh, yuck!" I said when its sour odor assaulted my nostrils. I let out a groan and heaved the smelly creature out of the dumpster.

"Hey, Greg." Jon shouted.

"I found a dead raccoon." I said, holding my nose. "It smelled so bad."

I stopped when I saw the camera. It had been hidden beneath the raccoon's body. The glow from the street lamp spilled over it. The glass of the camera lens reflected the light like a single, shining eye. I grabbed it and pulled it up from the trash. Then I climbed to my feet and leaned over the dumpster.

"I found it!" I cried happily, holding the camera so Jon could see it. "Here it is. I can't believe I found it!"

"Great." Jon said without enthusiasm. I strapped the camera around my neck. Then, holding on to the top of the dumpster, I lowered myself to the ground. My shirt and jeans were covered with dust and sticky grease. But I didn't care. I had the camera in my hands.

"What's so great about it?" Jon asked, squinting at the camera as he rubbed the top. "Does it work?"

I didn't want to tell him the story of the camera. I knew he wouldn't believe it, anyway. I didn't want to scare him. But I wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"Yeah. It works." I answered, dusting off the back with my hand. "It takes pretty good pictures."

"But why do you want it so much?" Jon asked, studying it as I worked to clean the dust off.

"Oh ... well. I promised to show it to someone. In school." I answered. "I kind of need it for a project."

"Maybe I should show the camera to my dad. He might not want you to take it." Jon said, scratching his head.

"But you threw it in the trash!" I reminded, holding the camera tightly in my hands, afraid Jon might take it away.

"But we didn't know it works." Jon countered. "Is it valuable? Maybe it's valuable. An antique or something."

"No way. It's not valuable." I insisted. "Please, Jon-"

"We'd better show it to Dad." Jon said, reaching for the camera.

But I pulled it away and gripped it tighter. Yet I tensed when we heard a click followed by a white flash of light.

"Oh, noooo!" I said when I realized I had pressed the shutter button and snapped a picture of Jon.

"Hey. Why did you do that?" Jon asked, annoyed. "

It-it was an accident. I didn't mean to. Really." I stammered, pulling the picture from the slot at the bottom of the camera while we blinked several times, trying to get the flashing lights to fade from our eyes.

"It's an instant camera?" Jon asked, surprised. "It looks too old to be an instant camera."

"Yeah. I know." I answered. But honestly, I didn't hear what Jon said or asked. I was focused on the photo, watching it slowly develop. I silently prayed the picture would show anything too terrible. *'Please, please let Jon be okay in the snapshot.'*

With my free hand, I pulled the little flashlight from my pocket. I beamed it down on the photo as it slowly developed. As I stared at the small, square snapshot, I could see Jon's face come into view. His eyes were closed, but his mouth was open, twisted in a strange expression. Before I could determine what was happening, Jon

grabbed the photo away from me and raised it close to his face to study it.

"Hey! What's with this camera?" He asked, sounding annoyed. I stepped up behind him to see the snapshot.

"Oh, nooooo." I groaned.

The photo came out very clear and bright. It showed Jon howling in pain. His eyes shut with his mouth open in a scream. His leg was raised. He was holding onto his sneaker with both hands. He held on to his sneaker because a huge nail was sticking up from the top. An enormous carpenter's nail - nearly as big as a pencil shoved up through the center of Jon's foot!

"What is this? Some kind of joke camera?" Jon asked, laughing as he turned to me.

I swallowed hard. I knew it wasn't a joke. The horrifying photos always came true. How could I keep Jon from having a nail jammed in his foot? What could I do? I decided I had to warn him. I had to tell him the truth about the camera.

"This is cool!" Jon exclaimed, studying the photo. "It really looks like me. I wonder how it works."

"It-it isn't cool." I stammered. "It's really kind of scary, Jon. The camera is evil. It has a curse on it. The photos always come true."

"For sure!" Jon said, laughing. I knew he wouldn't believe me.

"Well, just be careful. The photo isn't a joke."

He laughed again. A gust of wind sent the tall weeds swaying. Snakes of black clouds slithered over the moon. Darkness swept over us.

"I need to borrow the camera." I said. "Just for one day."

"It's such a cool camera. I don't know. Maybe I should take it home."

"I'll bring it back tomorrow afternoon." I promised. "I just have to take it to school."

"I'd better ask my dad." Jon asked, his mouthing twisting as he thought. He then pointed to a wall of lumber under the trees. "He's back there with the architect, talking about the new house."

"No. Wait!" I said, worried.

But Jon took off, running up the hill through the swaying weeds. I started after him- but stopped when I heard a shrill bleat. And then Jon's horrifying roar of pain soared out over the lawn. My breath caught in my chest. I stumbled forward through the weeds. And saw Jon holding his sneaker, his face twisted in pain. Even in the dim moonlight, I could see the enormous nail pushing up through his foot.

"Jon! I'll get your dad!" I shouted. But I didn't need to find him. Two men one tall and thin, the other chubby and short - rushed out from behind the lumber pile. I guessed they were the architect and Jon's dad.

"Jon? What's wrong?" The chubby one, Jon's dad, asked. Jon tossed back his head in another scream of pain.

"He's got a nail in his foot!" I shouted, running up to them, pointing frantically. Both men ran past me.

"Oh, good heavens!" Jon's dad said, scared. They grabbed Jon under the arms. The tall man held Jon's injured foot above the ground.

"Into my car." He urged. "I have a towel. We can wrap the foot. He's losing a lot of blood."

"Should we pull out the nail?" Jon's dad asked in a quivering voice.

"No. Too dangerous." The other man replied.

"Don't pull it out! Don't!" Jon pleaded. "It'll hurt too much!"

"We can't even take off the sneaker!" Jon's dad cried.

"The hospital is that way." The architect said. "Only a few minutes away."

"Owwww. It hurts! It hurrrrts!" Jon wailed. The two men lifted him off the ground. And half-walking, half-running, they carried him down to a car parked across from the dumpster.

I watched from the weeds as they gently lowered Jon into the backseat. I saw them struggle with a long white towel. Finally, they had it tightly wrapped around the foot and sneaker. They closed Jon's car door before quickly sliding into the front. A few seconds later, the car roared off into the darkness. I stood in the middle of the yard, feeling the swaying weeds brush against the legs of my jeans. I swallowed hard. My mouth suddenly felt as dry as cotton.

"Poor Jon." I muttered. The camera was as evil as ever. Tonight it had found another victim.

It's all my fault. It was an accident. I didn't mean to press the shutter. But I pressed it. The two men hadn't even looked at me. They were so upset about Jon that I don't think they saw me. I glanced down and realized that I still gripped the camera in my hands. I had a strong urge to heave it to the ground. To stomp on it again and again until I smashed it forever.

My eye caught something fluttering in the tall grass. I bent and picked it up. It was the snapshot. I squinted once again at Jon, holding his foot and shrieking in pain. I tucked the picture into the pocket of my flannel shirt.

"I'll bring it to Mr. Saur." I decided.

I'll bring in the camera and the photo of Jon. I'll tell him exactly what happened to Jon tonight. I won't have to snap a picture in school.

I have this picture as proof. So it won't be dangerous. It won't be dangerous at all.

Real World

"And he almost redeemed himself." Yatsuhashi said, shaking his head.

"But he still decided to bring the camera." Blake said.

"At least he doesn't have to take a picture." Ruby said. "Which is good."

"Not exactly. Greg still has to prove it. And the only way to do that is to take another photo. Otherwise, the teacher will think Greg got someone to edit it somehow." Coco said.

"And even if the teacher believed Greg, I'm positive he would take another couple of photos and try to defend his actions with a weak excuse." Pyrrha said.

"At this point, I'm pretty sure the camera is making him take the photos." Nora said.

"Uh, no. That's not true." A familiar voice said. Turning to where it came from, everyone saw four figures walking toward them. Well, three figures and a dog.

"Oh. Hello Lucy, Cassie, Grady." Roman said, nodding toward them, with Neo doing the same.

"Hey, Roman. Hey, Neo." They said as Vandal sat next to them.

"Wait. Before anything is else said." Blake said, eyeing locking on Grady. "You're the new Werewolf of Fever Swamp."

"That's right. I have been ever since Will drowned in the bog."

"And you're Lucy. The girl who cried monster and whose parents are monsters that ate the librarian." Yang said.

"That's right." Lucy said before revealing her fangs, earning a gasp from Fox, Coco, Pyrrha, Yatsuhashi, Ren, and Weiss.

"And who are you?" Velvet asked, looking at Cassie.

"My name is Cassie O' Rourke. I'm Grady's neighbor and friend." Cassie answered. "And yes, I already knew about Grady being the Werewolf of Fever Swamp. I was there with him when it happened."

"If that's the case, why didn't Jaune write about you in the book?" Ren asked.

"That's because I asked him to omit me from the story for personal reasons. Nothing bad, mind you, just personal."

"Oh. Okay."

"How do you four know each other?" Weiss asked.

"Are you four connected in some way?" Ruby asked.

"No. We met about a year after my incident at Fever Swamp. Which is two years after Lucy learned she was part monster." Grady answered.

"And we became good friends after we helped Grady learn to control his curse and help rid Mistral and Vacou of some less than savory, unique visitors." Lucy added.

"Wait. Mistral and Vacou? Is this happening all over Remnant?" Weiss asked, shocked.

"Yes. But don't worry. Most aren't bad. They just want to be left alone or are good in nature." Lucy answered.

"But some are real bad. Luckily, most are dealt with already, contained, or gone." Cassie added.

"That's good." Velvet said in relief.

"But anyway." Coco said. "What did you mean when it's not true that the camera is forcing Greg to take the photos?"

"That's because, despite how powerful and evil the camera is, it cannot force anyone to find and/or use it. It also can't move on its own. If someone hides it well, then its powers are useless." Grady answered.

"And if anyone takes a photo of it, it is of their own free will. But that is either from ignorance, something petty like Greg's motivation, or something more evil." Lucy added.

"Well, I take back what I said about Greg." Ruby said.

"And me saying we should cut him some slack." Nora added.

"Anyway. Since you three are here, care to listen in on the story?" Roman asked.

"Sure." Cassie, Grady, and Lucy answered, with Vandal letting out a bark as they sat on some nearby chairs.

"Alright. It was the next morning, and Greg was gulping down his breakfast. He then put on his backpack, strapped the camera around his neck, and raced out the door."

Story

I left the house fifteen minutes early as I didn't want to run into Shari, Michael, or Bird. It was a warm day today. The air smelled fresh and sweet. I saw a row of tulips poking up through the ground along the side of the house. They were the first flowers of spring. I loped down the driveway and turned at the sidewalk's corner. The camera felt

heavy against my chest. I reached up to adjust the strap- and heard a voice calling me.

"Greg! Hey, Greg! Wait up!" Shari shouted. I spun the camera behind me and tried to hide it under my arm. But I was too slow. Shari had already spotted it. And as she ran at me, her eyes remained on the camera as she shook her head. "I don't believe you! You're unreal! You pulled that thing from the Coffman house!"

"Well ... not exactly." I said.

"How come, then?"

"How come you're so early, Shari?"

"I was watching out the window for you." She confessed. "I wanted to see if you were crazy enough to get that camera."

"You were spying on me? Why?" I asked, frowning.

"Because I'm not letting you take that evil thing to school." She answered as she stepped in front of me to block my way.

"Who made you queen of the world? It's a free country, you know. " I asked, snickering. Shari snarled before crossing her arms.

"I'm serious, Greg. You can't take it. I won't let you."

I faked to the left and tried to edge past her on the right. But she stayed in front of me. I bumped into her and then backed up a step when she didn't move.

"I'm serious." She repeated. "Take the camera home."

"Shari, you're being a real jerk. You can't tell me what to do!" I said, annoyed. Her expression changed as she uncrossed her arms and tugged her black hair back over her shoulders.

"Don't you remember how dangerous that camera is? Don't you remember all the horrible things it did to us?"

I gripped the camera in both hands. It suddenly felt very heavy. The metal felt cold against the front of my T-shirt.

"Don't you remember, Greg? "Shari pleaded. "I disappeared because of that camera. I disappeared into thin air! You don't want that to happen, do you? Think how terrible you'd make someone else feel."

"I'm not going to take any pictures. Really. I'm just going to show it to Mr. Saur so he'll change my grade." I said, swallowing hard as the night before came to mind and how the camera injured Jon.

"Why will seeing an old camera make him change your grade? "Shari demanded.

"Because I have a photo to show him, too." I shouted. I pulled the snapshot of Jon out of my pocket and flashed it in front of her face.

"Oooh, gross !" she cried, shoving the photo away with both hands. "That is sick!"

"I know." I said, sliding the photo back into my pocket. "The poor kid. I took this picture. Then, a minute later, it really happened to him."

"So I'm right!" Shari shouted, her eyes narrowed at the camera in my hands. "You just proved my point, didn't you, Greg!? I'm right!"

A car rumbled past, filled with kids on their way to school. A small brown dog stuck its head out the back window and barked at us. I glanced at my watch. If we stayed here arguing another few minutes, Shari and I would be late for school.

"We've got to go." I told her as I began walking, taking long strides. But she hurried to block my way.

"No, Greg. I can't let you. I can't."

"Shari, give me a break." I said, rolling my eyes.

"It's too dangerous." She insisted. "I know I'm right. I know it will get you into big trouble."

"Get out of my way, Shari."

"Give me the camera."

"No way!"

She grabbed for it with both hands and yanked It off my shoulders. I tried to grab it back. But not even a second later, the camera flashed in Shari's face. She blinked as her hands shot away from the camera while she let out a startled cry.

"Oh! Sorry! Sorry! Really! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to -" I cried, backing away. The camera felt warm in my hands. I reached for the square photo that slid from the slot.

"Give me that!" Shari demanded as she swiped the snapshot away from me. "What have you done to me?"

"It was an accident! You know I didn't mean to snap it."

"What have you done? What have you done ?" She repeated, staring down at the square as it developed. Her voice trembled more each time she said it. I saw that her hand was shaking. "I told you not to bring out the camera. I begged you to leave it at home."

"Shari, I'm sorry. Maybe it won't be so bad. Maybe-"

"Maybe I'll disappear again, Greg. Maybe I'll disappear forever." Shari said, swallowing hard.

"No!"I cried. "Don't say that. Please!"

We both stared down at the photo. It developed so slowly. First, the yellow darkened over the white square. I began to see Shari's face.

Was she screaming? Was she howling in pain? I couldn't tell. The blue tint filled in over the yellow. I could see Shari's face outlined in green.

"You look okay." I told her. "I think you're okay."

"Wait." She said as she bit her lower lip. She didn't blink. Her eyes squinted hard as the red and blue tints spread.

The picture darkened to black. I could see Shari's face clearly now. She wasn't smiling. She didn't look happy. But she wasn't screaming, either.

"Hey!" Shari cried. "It's a negative."

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

"It's not a photo. It's a negative. The photo didn't come out. It's all reversed." Shari answered, holding the square up to me. I stared at it. She was right. Everything was reversed.

"Maybe the camera is broken." I said, letting out a long sigh of relief. "You're okay, Shari. The camera doesn't work."

"Maybe." She said as she handed me the negative. I slid it into my pocket, but when I looked up, she had a strange smile on her face. It seemed evil.

"Shari. What's your problem?" I nervously asked.

I should have known. I should have guessed what she planned to do. I should have moved faster. She grabbed the camera with both hands, spun it around, pointed it in my face, and flashed a picture.

"Hey!" I tried to duck away from the lens, but I was too late. She caught me.

"Shari! That's not funny!" I cried.

"It won't hurt you. The camera is broken, remember?" She asked. My throat suddenly felt dry.

Is it broken? Will this one be a negative, too? Or will it show me howling in pain with a nail through my foot or something even worse? I wondered. As I stared at the small square, my imagination ran wild. I pictured my body stretched out like a rubber band, tugging at an arrow through my chest, or lying mashed under a huge steamroller. "Shari, how could you do this to me?"

"You're really scared. Admit it, Greg. You're really scared. Now maybe you get it. Maybe you see why I didn't want you to bring the camera to school." She said, her dark eyes flashing. My hand trembled. I gripped the snapshot with both hands. The colors darkened.

"It's not a negative." I said, horrified. Shari stepped up behind me and stared down at the photo.

"Oh, noooo!" We both cried at the same time. But Shari began to laugh after a moment.

"I don't believe this! This is horrible!" I wailed as I recognized my face but didn't recognize my body.

Real Life

"Normally, I'd be scared and worried for whoever gets their photo taken with the camera." Blake began.

"But not now. Greg 100% deserves whatever the camera is going to do." Yang finished.

"Especially considering he ignored Shari's warning, called her a jerk for being the sensible one, and took a photo of her." Weiss said.

"Even if it was accidental." Pyrrha said.

"He should be glad it wasn't me; otherwise, he wouldn't have any fingers now." Coco said.

"Or legs." Nora added.

"Should we tell them?" Grady asked Cassie and Lucy.

"I-" Lucy began, but a shake from Roman stopped her.

"No." Cassie said.

"Okay. After seeing the photo, Grady tried to rationalize what it could mean. At first, he thought his head was resting on top of a giant balloon." Roman said.

Story

Then I realized that the giant balloon was me. In the photo, I weighed about four hundred pounds! I was not kidding. Four hundred pounds! I gaped at the picture, studying my round face and my even rounder body. I had about eight chins. My cheeks were puffed way out. The collar of my T-shirt was hidden under one of my flabby chins. The shirt was stretched tight over my chest and only came down to my belly, which bulged nearly to the ground. I really looked like a really gross mountain of pudding!

"Stop laughing!" I snapped at Shari. "It isn't funny!"

"It's very funny." She insisted as she grabbed the photo, raised it to her face, and started laughing again. "You're bigger than Sumo One and Sumo Two!"

I grabbed the photo back. I stared at the folds of flab hanging down from my cheeks. My face was so huge and puffy, and my eyes looked like tiny pig eyes. And my fat knees!

"Are you still going to bring the camera to school?" Shari asked. "Have you changed your mind yet?"

"I have to show it to Mr. Saur." I answered. "I'm just going to show him the camera. And the picture of Jon."

"And the picture of you?" She asked, grinning.

"No way." I shoved it into my jeans pocket. "I don't want anyone to see it. Ever!"

"Come on." Shari said, glancing at her watch. "We'd better hurry! We're late."

She started to run down the sidewalk, and I followed her all the way to school. But I kept picturing the photo. The image of my flabby face and my enormous four-hundred-pound body haunted my mind.

'Don't worry about it.' I told myself. The camera is broken. There's nothing to worry about, nothing to worry about.

But guess what? I was worried!

Ten Minutes Later

The halls were nearly empty when Shari and I arrived at school. The first bell had already rung. I hid the camera under a bunch of stuff on the floor of my locker. I didn't have Mr. Saur's English class until just before lunch. And I didn't want to take a chance of Brian, Donny, or somebody else grabbing the camera and messing around with it. I slammed the locker shut and locked it. Then I waved to Bird and Michael, who were hurrying into their classroom.

I wanted to tell them I had the camera. And I wanted to tell them about Jon and the nail in his foot. But I decided I'd better keep quiet. Michael and Bird agreed with Shari. They didn't want me to take the camera out again. They were too afraid of it.

And they were probably right.

I slid into class just as the final bell rang. I ducked low in my seat, trying not to be noticed. I had a long time to wait until Mr. Saur's

class. Today was the first day ever that I couldn't wait for Sourball's class to begin!

Once again, I didn't hear a word my other teachers said. In social studies, Mrs. Wackman was rattling on about bauxite production in South America. I wanted to raise my hand and ask her what bauxite is! I've always wondered about bauxite. I think it's some kind of South American car. But I'm not sure. Her voice faded into the background. My mind was busy practicing my speech to Mr. Saur.

"Mr. Saur." I planned to say. "You made a terrible mistake yesterday. But I'm not going to hold it against you. I know you will be fair and change the grade on my report as soon as I show you this."

'Whoa. That's too stiff.' I told myself. ' *That doesn't sound like me at all. I'll never be able to get those words out.'*

I tried a different approach. "Here's the evil camera, Mr. Saur. And here's a picture it took of a boy I met. A minute later, the picture came true. You asked me to bring in proof- and here it is."

'That's better.' I decided. It's straight to the point. But will he believe me? *'He'll have to. Photos don't lie. He'll have to change my grade.'*

I stared at the wall clock over the chalkboard. Why was it moving so slowly? Why? Finally, the bell rang. I jumped up, ran out the door, and dove for my locker. Bird called to me from down the hall, but I pretended I didn't hear him.

I pulled the camera from its hiding place and slammed the locker door shut. I tucked it carefully under my arm, protecting it. I saw Sumo One and Sumo Two across the hall. They were shoving a fifth grader up against a locker, making him bounce back like a yo-yo.

That's their hobby which was making kids bounce. And guess who is one of their favorite bouncers? That's right. Me. I spun around and hurried the other way. I didn't feel like bouncing today. And I didn't want Brian and Donny to set their eyes on the camera. I took the

long way around to Mr. Saur's class, jogging the whole way. I held the camera snugly and practiced my speech. A group of kids was talking in front of the classroom, blocking the door.

"Make way!" I cried, pushing through them. I wanted to see Mr. Saur before the bell rang.

I stepped into the room but blinked against the bright sunlight streaming through the windows. I turned and ran breathlessly toward Mr. Saur's desk. But I stopped halfway there and let out a cry of dismay.

"May I help you ?" Asked the young woman sitting behind Mr. Saur's desk. "Are you okay?"

I stared at her with my mouth hanging open to my knees. I didn't answer her questions. I gripped the camera tightly in both hands, afraid I might drop it.

"Where is Mr. Saur?" I managed to choke out.

"He's not feeling well." She answered, studying my face. "I'm Ms. Rose. I'm substituting today."

"He-he's not here?" I stammered in a high, shrill voice earning a nod from Ms. Rose.

"I'll be teaching the class today. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No." I muttered unhappily, glancing down at the camera. "No. You can't help me."

The room was never this noisy when Mr. Saur sat behind the desk. Kids were shouting and laughing. Someone tossed a balled-up piece of paper at me. It bounced off my shoulder and onto my desk. I heard loud laughter from the back of the room. We always give substitutes a tough time. When a teacher doesn't show up, it's

always time to celebrate. But I didn't feel like celebrating today. I was so disappointed.

"Can I put this in my locker? It will only take a second. My locker is right out there." I asked Ms. Rose, holding up the camera. The final bell rang. Ms. Rose held her hands over her ears. The bell was on the ceiling, right over her desk.

"Okay." She said when the clanging stopped. "But hurry back. I'm going to be talking about the subjunctive tense today. And you don't want to miss that."

Thrills and chills, huh? I thanked her and hurried to the door. The long hall stood empty as everyone was in class. My sneakers thudded loudly on the hard floor. My mind was racing, thinking about Mr. Saur and the camera.

'I'll have to leave it in my locker until he gets back.' I promised Jon I'd keep it only for one day. But what choice did I have? I turned the corner - and bumped into Brian and Donny.

"Hey!" Brian grunted.

"Hey!" Donny greeted.

"You guys are late." I said, trying to hurry past them. But they blocked my way with their big, broad bodies.

"Sourball isn't here." Donny said, grinning. "He's sick or something. So we've got a substitute."

"Tell me something I don't know." I muttered.

"So we're in no hurry." Brian said. "Why should we hurry for a substitute?"

I tried to slip between them. But they were too quick for me. They squeezed together, and I bounced back off them.

"We're going to switch places ." Brian grinned. "I'm going to tell her I'm Donny. And Donny is going to say he's me."

"Good joke." I said, rolling my eyes. "Very original. Now, can I get by?"

"No way." Donny said, puffing up his big chest and leaning over me menacingly.

"You have to pay a toll if you want to pass." Brian demanded. He stuck out his big paw for money.

"How much is the toll?" I sighed.

"How much have you got?" Brian shot back. They both guffawed and slapped high fives. They really think they're funny.

"I've got to get to my locker." I insisted.

"Hey!" I reached for it with both hands when Brian grabbed the camera and raised it over his head.

"Look. Greg brought his magic camera to school." He told Donny.

"Oooh, I'm scared!" Donny sarcastically said. He pretended to shiver and shake.

"But the camera is bad!" Brian exclaimed, holding it out of my frantic reach. "It's cursed, Donny! You remember Greg's report."

"You mean the report he got an F on?" Donny asked as they shared another laugh.

"Let's check it out. Say cheese, Greg." Brian said as he lowered the camera to his eye and aimed it at me.

"No, please!" I pleaded as I made another grab for the camera. But Donny grabbed me and pinned my arms behind my back.

"Go ahead. Snap it." Donny said. "Let's put a curse on Greg. Snap his picture."

"No, please!" I begged as Donny wrapped his huge paws tightly around me and pinned my arms against my back. "The camera really is cursed! You don't know what you're doing! Stop!"

Brian ignored me, of course. He held the camera to his eye and raised his finger over the shutter button.

"Brian, please!" I saw his finger lower over the button. Then a loud voice shouted, getting our attention.

"What's going on here?" The voice demanded. Brian cried out and nearly dropped the camera while Donny dropped my arms and stumbled back against the wall.

"Mr. Grund!" I exclaimed. He's the principal of Pitts Landing Middle School. Mr. Grund is young and has wavy blond hair and a really good tan. He looks more like a surfer than a principal. The girls in our school all have crushes on him. For once, I was glad to see him.

"Where should you guys be right now?" He asked, glancing up at the clock on the wall.

"Uh ... we're going to Mr. Saur's class." Donny replied, turning bright red.

"We were just helping Greg with his camera." Brian added as he handed the camera back to me.

"That looks like a valuable old camera." Mr. Grund said. "You should be careful with that, Greg."

"I'm trying. I'm going to lock it in my locker right now." I said before pushing past Sumo One and Sumo Two and hurrying down the hall.

"Get to class, guys. And don't give your substitute a hard time, okay." Mr. Grund scolded the others.

"Okay." Brian promised.

"No problem." Donny agreed.

Real World

"Talk about a close call." Coco said.

"Yeah." The others agreed.

"While Greg took the camera for his own selfish reason, can you imagine if someone like those two bullies got their hands on the camera?" Ruby asked.

"Or if someone like Cardin gets his hands on it." Blake said.

"Or worse, someone like my father." Weiss added.

"What happened to the bullies?" Pyrrha asked.

"Dead." Neo answered.

"What happened?" Ren asked.

"Uh. Let's just say." Grady began before clearing his throat. "Be careful what you wish for."

"And that wishing isn't as simple as it appears in the movies." Cassie added.

"I... don't think I follow." Nora said, confused.

"Think of genies, and you will have a clear picture." Lucy said.

"Oh. I get it now."

"Anyway, back to the story." Roman said. "After school, Greg met Shari, and they walked home together."

Story

"What's up?" I asked.

"I got an A on my math test." Shari answered.

"Big surprise. You always get As in math."

"So? Maybe I like to brag."

But as we continued walking home, I began to feel a little strange. I felt tired and kind of weak. I stopped about half a block from my house and tugged off my backpack.

"What's your problem." Shari asked, sounding annoyed. "Why do you keep fiddling with that backpack?"

"I think someone messed with it." I answered, loosening the straps. "I had it just right. And now it's too tight."

"Why would anyone mess with your backpack?" Shari asked as she blew a bubble-gum bubble nearly as big as her head. But I stuck out a finger and popped it. She became slightly grossed out when it covered her face, but she quickly wiped it off. "Are you impressed? That was my biggest one ever. Wish I had a picture of it."

"Don't say picture. Don't say the words picture or camera." I grumbled. I had already told her at lunch about Mr. Saur not showing.

"Where is the camera?" She asked, pulling gum from her hair.

"Locked up safe in my locker." I answered as we turned and saw Michael and Bird running down the sidewalk toward us. "Did you tell Michael and Bird I have the camera?"

"No. They'd be too upset. After all the horrible things it did last summer, they never want to see that camera again. And neither do I." Shari answered, glaring at me.

"Hey, what's up?" Bird asked as he slapped me on the back so hard I stumbled off the curb, causing Michael to laugh. "You guys doing anything?"

"Not much." I answered, straightening my backpack. I still couldn't get it comfortable.

"Get your bikes." Michael urged. "Come on. It's a great day to ride around."

"Sounds good." I said. Honestly, it sounded like a decent way to get my mind off Mr. Saur and that stupid camera.

"Let's meet at my house." Shari suggested. "I have to ask my mom first."

Michael and Bird jogged toward their houses while Shari and I crossed the street and headed to our homes, which were side by side. Mom and Dad were at work, and Terry wasn't home from high school yet. I dropped the backpack in the front hall, raced to the kitchen, pulled a box of juice from the refrigerator, and drank it in two long sips from the straw. But I still felt weak, kind of lifeless even.

I thought maybe a long bike ride would help me get my energy back. But I noticed that my jeans felt uncomfortable and a little tight. I ran to my room and pulled on my pair of really baggy shorts. Mom and Dad always teased me about these shorts. They say there's room enough for a friend inside them. But I like them. I think they're cool. And they're really comfortable. I usually don't wear them when I ride my bike because they're so long and baggy that they sometimes get caught in the chain. I hurried outside and found Shari, Michael, and Bird waiting for me on their bikes.

"Let's go, Greg." Bird urged. "It's starting to get cloudy."

I pulled open the garage door and stepped inside, careful to walk around the black oil stains on the concrete floor. I took my bike from against the wall and walked it out onto the driveway. Then, I did my

high-flying circus riding trick. It's my favorite way of getting on my bike. I lean on the handlebars, heave myself up in the air, and then I come flying down on the seat. Up I went, pushing my body into the air, swinging my legs in the air, and dropping onto the seat. But to my surprise, both ties popped. I heard the explosion and then a whoosh of air as the tires flattened against the drive.

"Hey! What's going on?" I asked, surprised.

"Whoa!" Shari cried while Michael and Bird burst out laughing.

"Nice tires." Michael said.

"Maybe you should go on a diet!" Bird added.

"Huh? A diet?" I repeated, swallowing hard. I knew that Bird was only joking. But his words sent a chill down my back. The ugly snapshot flashed into my mind. I saw myself all bloated and huge, like an enormous saggy water balloon. I felt my face go hot and knew that I was blushing. I saw my friends staring at me as I climbed off my bike. "Guess I jumped too hard."

"Maybe you need a tricycle." Michael cracked, but No one laughed. Michael's jokes never make any sense.

I squatted down and examined the tires. I ran my hands along the rubber- and found two big holes. They were blowouts. But they were brand new ties. Sighing, I dragged the bike back into the garage.

"I'll take Terry's old bike." I said. I actually like my brother's bike better than mine. It's a twelve-speed, and mine is only ten. He hardly ever rides it now that he's got his driver's license. But he doesn't like me riding it.

"Better not sit on it! Maybe you should just walk it!" Bird suggested, with him and Michael laughing afterward and slapping each other's hands.

"Ha - ha." I said. "You guys are as funny as a flat tire."

"No. We're as funny as two flat tires!" Michael said.

"Maybe you need a mountain bike." Bird said. "Something sturdy."

"Maybe you need a sturdy punch in the face." I growled.

"Just don't sit on me!" Michael exclaimed, raising both hands in front of him as if to shield himself from me.

"Are we going to ride or not?" Shari asked, annoyed. She glanced up at the graying sky. "If we don't hurry, we're going to get caught in the rain."

I eased myself carefully onto Terry's bike. Then I followed them down the driveway and into the street. We rode aimlessly around town. When we reached the long, narrow park a few blocks from school, we rode onto the grass and raced as fast as we could, with Bird winning. Bird has the best bike and the longest legs, so he always wins our races. After about an hour, it started to drizzle, so we turned for home. I was glad as my legs felt heavy and my muscles ached. As we pedaled through the raindrops, I caught Shari watching me. It almost seemed like she was studying me. And despite the sweat rolling down my forehead, I suddenly felt cold all over my body.

'Why is she staring at me like that?' I wondered. *'Why?'*

The Following Morning

I woke up with two words on my lips: Mr. Saur.

'Today is the day I show him the camera.' I told myself, stretching and yawning. And today is the day I get my grade changed.

I stood up, still yawning, and rubbed my eyes. I then saw that my pillow had fallen to the floor during the night. When I bent over to pick it up, I felt a tug on the front of my pajama shirt. The buttons all popped off and scattered over the floor.

"Huh?" I opened my mouth in surprise - and heard a long rrrrrrip. It took a few seconds to realize that my pajama bottoms had ripped right up the back. "Oh, nooooo."

The collar of the pajama shirt dug tightly into both sleeves and my neck. I tried to loosen it, but they ripped at the shoulder! My heart pounding, I straightened up and crossed the room to the mirror. My whole body was trembling as I stepped in front of it.

I shut my eyes. I couldn't bear to look. But I had no choice. I had to see. I had to know. Slowly, slowly, I opened one eye, then the other. I took a deep breath and gazed at my reflection.

Had the snapshot come true? Did I weigh four hundred pounds?

I leaned into the mirror and stared at myself. No. Not four hundred pounds. I didn't look too different. A little puffy. My cheeks were a bit rounder. My shoulders were broader. I stepped back to check out the rest of my body, and Mom came walking into the room.

"Greg, what are you doing? You're going to be late for school." She said. But I didn't hear it as what had happened finally dawned on me.

I grew.

"Mom, I grew last night! I- I ripped my pajamas." I said, turning away from the mirror.

"Greg, you didn't grow overnight. Those pajamas always were a little small on you." She calmly said, narrowing her eyes at my torn pajamas.

"They were?" I asked. But then I thought that mom was right. Maybe I wasn't growing huge, and it was all in my head. "How do I look?"

"You look fine." She said, shrugging.

"I mean, do I look fatter to you?"

"Well, actually..." Her voice trailed off.

"Actually, what?"

"Maybe I'll put skim milk on your cereal this morning." She said before leaving.

Real World

"Wait." Coco said.

"What is it?" Lucy asked.

"The camera's picture came true, and Greg is struggling to believe it. But his mother doesn't seem to notice anything. Can the camera alter reality or something to make everyone else unaware of the changes?"

"We're not sure. Maybe, but it's pretty hard to notice it." Roman answered.

"We tried a few times. But the results were too flimsy and inconsistent." Neo added.

"We tried a few different ways to see if we could circumvent the camera, but they all failed." Grady added.

"And some tests showed some people not noticing a change while others knew something was off." Caddy said.

"But back to the story. After breakfast, Grady headed toward school. But he was dreading it with every step he took." Roman said.

Story

"Hi, Greg. Putting on a little weight?" That's how Mr. Saur greeted me when I hurried up to his desk before English class. His words sent a cold shiver down the back of my neck. But I ignored them and held up the camera.

"Mr. Saur, I want to show you something."

"You want to take my picture? I already had my photo taken for the yearbook, Greg." Mr. Saur said as he lowered his eyes to the camera and frowned at it.

"No. This is the camera, Mr. Saur. This is the camera that-" I began, but Mr. Saur raised a hand to stop me.

"Not right now, Greg." He said, standing up from his desk chair.

"But, Mr. Saur- "

He was gazing over my shoulder. I turned and saw Mr. Grund standing in the classroom doorway. Mr. Saur hurried over to talk to him. They talked until the bell rang. Then Mr. Saur returned to the front of the room to begin class.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday. I understand you had a wonderful time learning the subjunctive tense." Mr. Saur announced. I was still standing beside his desk, the camera in my hands. He stepped up to the chalkboard, turned, and saw me. "Greg, take your seat, please. We have a lot to do today."

"But, Mr. Saur-" I said, raising the camera.

"Take your seat." I had no choice. I sighed and trudged to my chair near the back of the room.

'How can I prove that my report was true if he won't even listen to me? ' I asked myself.

"Today, we're going to hear more of your reports about true things that happened to you." Mr. Saur said before turning to a girl in the front row. "Marci, I believe it is your turn. What is your report about?"

"It's about my cat, Waffles. It's about all the funny things Waffles does around the house." Marci Ryder answered, standing up.

'Boring!' I thought, with a few other kids groaning too. But Mr. Saur actually smiled. The first time ever!

"I like cats. I have six of them myself." He said.

'Oh, yuck! Six cats!' I thought. I can't sit through a boring report about a boring I shot my hand into the air and waved it frantically. "Mr. Saur? Mr. Saur?"

"What?" He demanded as his smile faded.

"Uh ... before Marci starts." I said. "Can I show you the camera? You know. The one from my report? You said if I brought it in and proved that it's evil, you'd change my grade."

"It's Marci's turn." Mr. Saur coldly replied as he rubbed his chin and frowned at me. "I know we all want to hear about Waffles."

"But, Mr. Saur. You promised!" I cried with a few kids snickering. My voice was so high that only dogs could hear it.

"Greg, you're not going to change my mind." Mr. Saur insisted.

"But I can prove it! I can prove the camera is evil." I pleaded, making a few kids snicker.

"Greg is evil!" Donny shouted, which made everyone laugh.

"Greg is baaaaad!" Some other kid shouted, earning another big laugh. But everyone went quiet when Mr. Saur slammed the chalkboard with his wooden pointer.

"Okay, Greg. One minute. It isn't fair to the others to give you extra time. But I'll give you one minute to show off your camera." He sighed as he motioned me forward.

One minute!

I knew that was all I needed. I felt my shirt pocket to ensure I had Jon's snapshot inside. I knew that once Sourball saw that photo and heard what happened to Jon that night, he'd believe me.

"Come on, Greg." the teacher urged. "Get up here. One minute."

"Coming." I said as I eagerly tried to stand up.

I then tried again and again, but I couldn't stand up. We have those chairs with the desk attached to the front. And I was stuck in the chair. Too fat to get out!

'What is happening to me?' I wondered, feeling panic creep up from my big blobby stomach. I climbed into this chair without any problem. That was less than an hour ago. And now I'm stuck in here. I must have put on a hundred pounds while I was sitting here!

"Greg, we're waiting." Mr. Saur said as he rolled his eyes and tapped the chalkboard impatiently with the pointer. On the fourth try, I finally managed to slide out of my seat. Carrying the camera carefully, I tromped up to the front of the room.

"This is the camera." I told Mr. Saur. "My friends and I found it in a deserted house, just as I said in my report. The camera has a curse on it, and-"

Mr. Saur took the camera from my hands and examined it. He rolled it over and over. He brought it up close to his face before raising his finger to the viewfinder. But I stopped him.

"No, don't!" I shrieked. "Don't take a picture!"

"If I don't take a picture, how will I know if the camera is evil or not?" He asked, lowering the camera.

"I brought a photo. This will prove I'm telling the truth." I said, reaching into my pocket. My fingers were so fat I had trouble poking them into the pocket. My hands felt like squishy balls of dough. They

were too blobby to make a fist! I nearly pulled the pocket off as I struggled to take out the snapshot of Jon. Finally, I pulled it out and shoved it in Mr. Saur's face. "Here. Look!"

Mr. Saur took the photo and examined it. His brows furrowed as he studied it. But I didn't know whether it was because he was looking the picture over or getting annoyed at the kids snickering in the background.

"That boy is named Jon. I took his picture two nights ago. He was perfectly okay. But the photo showed him with a nail through his foot. Two minutes later, it came true. Jon got a nail in his foot, and his dad had to rush him to the hospital." I explained.

But to my surprise, Mr. Saur burst out laughing. This was another first. It was the first time he'd ever laughed in class. Even the kids that were still snickering went quiet from shock.

"It's not funny." I insisted. "Poor Jon was in so much pain. He-"

"I've seen those trick nails." Mr. Saur said, composing himself.

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

"I used to have a fake arrow. When I slid it on, it looked as if I had an arrow going straight through my head. So I understand how you made it appear that this boy has a nail through his foot." He explained while handing me back the photo.

"No! It's real! It's real! Look how much pain Jon is in! Look at his face!" I said.

"Your friend is a good actor." Mr. Saur said.

"No! He isn't my friend! I don't even know him! You've got to believe me! You've got to!"

"Your minute is up." Mr. Saur said, glancing at the clock.

"But you promised!"

"Greg, go sit down." He ordered. "You're not going to fool me with an old camera and a joke snapshot."

"You lose, Greg!" Donny shouted.

"You're evil, Greg!" Brian added.

Everyone laughed. I could feel my face growing hot. I knew my face must have been beet red. I felt ready to explode. I was embarrassed and hurt, and angry all at the same time.

"I'd give you an A for effort." Mr. Saur cruelly said. "But I'm still giving you an F for your report. F for fake!"

Everyone laughed again. I couldn't take it anymore. I let out a cry of fury - and went running. Well, at least I tried to run. But I was too heavy to move fast. I could only waddle the door.

"Where are you going, Greg?" I heard Mr. Saur ask.

I pretended I didn't hear him and lumbered to the door. I had the camera tucked under one flabby arm. I pulled the door open with the other and bounced out into the silent, empty hall. I could hear Mr. Saur calling me from the classroom. And I could hear the kids laughing and talking excitedly.

I slammed the door shut behind me and kept moving. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't have a plan. I was so angry. I wanted to scream and cry and punch the walls. I turned the corner and saw Shari down the hall.

"Greg! What's going on?" Shari called, surprised to see me. She was wearing a short black skirt over blue tights. Shari started to run down the hall toward me. She took about four steps and then cried out as her skirt fell down! "I don't believe this!"

We both stared down at her skirt, which had fallen around her ankles. She dropped her books and bent to pull it up. Typically, I would have burst out laughing. But she seemed so upset; I just stood there.

"I-I'm losing weight." She stammered, straightening the skirt around her waist. "I weighed myself this morning. I've lost eight pounds!"

"Oh, wow!" I said, shaking my head. Why was she losing weight? I tried to cheer her up. But I didn't know how, so I said the only thing I could think of at the moment. "Uh...eight pounds isn't so much."

"Greg- I only weighed ninety to start !" She said, angry and annoyed. "Now I'm down to eighty-two. I can't keep my skirt up. All my clothes hang on me!"

"Maybe if you eat a started-"

"You're not helping." Shari snapped.

"Look at me!" I cried, holding my arms out so she could see my big stomach. "I think I put on two hundred pounds overnight! A few minutes ago, I couldn't get out of my chair!"

Her eyes checked me out. She was so upset about being skinny that she hadn't even looked at me. She squinted hard at me. Then she burst out laughing.

"Oh, gross. You look really weird!"

"Thanks a bunch."

"What are we going to do? Why is this happening to us?" Shari asked. I started to answer - but I heard footsteps approaching from down the hall. Shari heard them, too. "Let's go. Quick. Help me pick up my books."

I bent down to pick up the books, and the back of my jeans burst open with a loud rrrrrrip.

Two Hours Later

After school, Bird, Michael, and some other kids started a softball game on the diamond behind the school. I didn't want to play. I didn't want them to see how huge I was getting. But they pulled me onto the diamond and forced me to play baseball.

'Maybe they won't notice anything different.' I thought as I crossed my fingers and hoped.

Maybe they won't notice that I've filled out a bit since this morning. My T-shirt was stretched against my bulging stomach. The shirt was so tight I could barely move my arms. My ripped jeans fit over my legs like tights.

'Maybe they won't notice.' I told myself as I tried to trot out to first base.

"Hey, Greg! Have you been super-sizing all your meals?" Bird called from the pitcher's mound. Everyone whooped and laughed. A few guys rolled around on the grass, giggling like hyenas.

"Hey - it's Sumo Three !" Michael yelled.

"It's Sumo Three and Four !" Someone else shouted, followed by more loud whooping and laughing.

"Give me a break." I said, angry.

"Give him a lunch break!" Michael called. It wasn't funny, but everyone laughed, anyway. They gathered around me in a wide circle and shook their heads.

"Weird. How did you put on two hundred pounds since yesterday?" Bird muttered. I would have answered, but I didn't want to talk about it.

"Are we going to play ball or what?" I asked, feeling my patience waning.

I had a strong urge to tell Bird and Michael why I was ballooning up so fast. I wanted to tell them I had taken my picture and that it showed me weighing at least four hundred pounds. I also wanted to tell them what was happening to Shari and that it was coming true. But I didn't dare tell them. They had warned me not to go back to the Coffman house. They told me not to go find the camera. They had begged me to forget about the entire thing.

But if I told them the truth, they'd think I was a total jerk. So I kept my mouth shut and tried to concentrate on the game. I did pretty well until I went to bat in the third inning. I hit the ball over the second baseman's head and trotted to first base with a single. I was totally out of breath by the time I reached the base. But the ball was still rolling around in the outfield.

"Keep running! Greg - go to second!" My teammates shouted. So, huffing and puffing, I lifted my heavy legs and made my way to second.

"Slide! Slide!" Everyone was shouting. So I slid into second. Safe! And then I couldn't get off my back. I wasn't strong enough to pick up my heavy body.

'I must look like Humpty - Dumpty!' I realized. I tried rolling. I tried rocking back and forth. And then I tried calling my friends for help.

One Hour Later

I was exhausted by the time I pulled my huge body to my house. Sweat poured off my forehead and rolled down my round cheeks and chin.

My clothes were stretched so tight I could barely breathe. My jeans were ripped. My shirt pressed against my skin, and my sneakers pinched my feet!

'This is horrible! I've got to get into something comfortable.' I decided. I then remembered my huge, baggy shorts. The ones I

wore to go bike riding the other day when I first started gaining weight. I carried my bulky body over to the dresser, bent over with a groan, and pulled out the big shorts. I tugged them on, eager to get comfortable. But as I kept tugging, I came to a horrifying realization.

The huge, baggy shorts were skintight!

Real World

"Here's a question. But I'm not sure if one of the previous answers already covered it." Velvet said.

"What is it?" Neo asked.

"Well, the camera slowly made Greg's misfortune come true. Is that because of some limitation the camera has, or did it do that to make Greg suffer even more?"

"Oh. We're not sure."

"Well, to be more precise, the camera does seem like it can drag out a misfortune. But we're not 100% sure if it is because of some kind of limitation. But we're leaning toward the camera dragging it out just because it wants to do that." Grady added.

"But that reminds me. Remember how you asked if the camera can warp minds or reality to make someone think something was always like that?" Cassie asked.

"Yeah." They answered.

"What about it?" Pyrrha asked.

"Well, we didn't want to give anything away yet. But Grady's mother only dismissed Greg's initial weight gain when she saw him. The camera didn't change anything else." Cassie explained.

"So she saw her son gain some weight but dismissed it, thinking she was seeing things or he was messing around?" Coco asked.

"Pretty much." Lucy answered.

"Not sure how I feel about that."

"Either way, back to the story. We're almost done." Roman said. "It was the following day. Greg had put on nearly three hundred pounds and now could barely walk."

Story

"It's an allergic reaction." Mom said.

"Excuse me? What's that?" I asked, staring at her.

"You ate something you're allergic to." She explained. "A person doesn't swell up like a balloon overnight."

"Do you eat a lot of candy bars after school ?" Dad asked, squinting at me. He was trying to look calm, but I could see how worried he was.

"He could eat a thousand candy bars a day! They wouldn't make him this huge!" She said, shaking her head.

"We'd better take him to an allergy doctor." Dad murmured, rubbing his chin.

"We'll take him to Dr. Weiss first. Dr. Weiss can tell us what kind of doctor to take him to." Mom argued.

They started to argue about what kind of doctor I needed. But as they did, I waddled out of the room. It took all my strength just to raise my enormous legs. My chins sagged down over my neck, and my big stomach bounced out of the room ahead of me.

I knew that no doctor could help me. I knew I didn't have an allergy. And I knew I didn't become a blimp because of candy bars. The snapshot from the evil camera made me look as big as a mountain.

And not even a few days later did it come true. No doctor could slim me down. No diet would work.

A Few Hours Later

"Please don't make me go to school tomorrow like this." I pleaded. "The kids will laugh at me. I'll be so embarrassed."

"You can't miss school." Dad insisted. "What if it takes weeks and weeks to get you back to normal?"

"The kids won't laugh at you. Your friends will understand that you're sick." Mom added. I begged and whined. I even got down on my fat knees to plead with them. But would they listen? No.

"Don't be embarrassed." Dad said as I waddled out the door to go to school the next morning.

Don't be embarrassed? I wore one of his baggy running suits - and it was tight on me! I felt embarrassed just walking down the street. When cars drove past, I knew the people staring at me, laughing at the giant mound of Jell - O bouncing along the sidewalk. I didn't want to walk to school. But my parents have a Honda Civic - and I didn't fit in the car!

Kids were staring as I squeezed through the front door of Pitts Landing Middle School. But strangely, everyone was kind. No one made jokes. In fact, no one said a word to me. I think they were afraid to come up to me. Afraid I might fall on them! I really did look like one of the balloons in the Thanksgiving Day parade!

The morning went pretty well. I kept to myself and tried to hide in corners. It wasn't easy to hide. But everyone left me alone. That was until I stepped into Mr. Saur's class. He was as sour as ever. And he embarrassed me in front of the whole class.

"Greg, I don't think you'll fit into a chair." He said, rolling his wooden pointer between his hands. "Why don't you just stand by the

window."

I didn't say anything. I waddled over to the side of the room. The room fell silent. The other kids didn't laugh. They could see that there was something seriously wrong with me. But Mr. Saur insisted on giving me a hard time.

"Greg, forget the window. If you stand there, I'm afraid you'll block out all the sun." Mr. Saur said, smiling. Again, no one laughed. I think the other kids felt sorry for me. Even Donny and Brian weren't cracking jokes. "Greg, I want you to go see the nurse. I want her to discuss the four food groups with you. I think you've been eating too much of all four."

I think that was supposed to be a cruel joke. But no one laughed.

I turned my bulk around and stared at him. Was he serious? Was he really sending me to the nurse? Did he not realize something was wrong? Was he taking some sort of sick pleasure from this?

"Get going." Mr. Saur, pointing to the door.

I turned and shuffled heavily out of the classroom. I expected Donny to stick out his big foot and try to trip me like he always does. But he stared straight ahead, as silent and still as everyone else in the class. I was glad. If he tripped me, I knew I'd never be able to get up. I pulled myself down the hall, thinking angry thoughts about Mr. Saur. Why did he make fun of me in front of everyone? Why was he so cruel? I couldn't answer my questions. Besides, I felt too angry to think clearly.

'I'll pay him back someday.' I told myself. I'll do something mean to him. I'll embarrass old Sourball in front of everyone.

My angry thoughts followed me to the nurse's office. There were girls whispering nearby, but I instantly forgot them when I saw the stopped outside the door and gaped at her girl huddled in the chair in the waiting room.

It was Shari!

It took me a few seconds to recognize her. Her jeans and T-shirt appeared to be about ten sizes too big! Her arms were as thin as toothpicks. Her face was pale and puckered. Her head had shrunk. It looked like a tiny lemon on her frail noodle-like body.

"Greg," she whispered weakly. "Is that you in that big body?"

"Shari!" I cried. "How much weight have you lost?"

"I- I don't know." She stammered. "Look at me! I'm shrinking away. I'm so light. It took me hours to walk to school this morning because the wind kept pushing me back!"

"Are you sick?" I asked, worried.

"I'm not sick, and neither are you. I'm shrinking away, and you're bloating up, and it's because of those photos we took." She answered in a tiny, frail voice. I sighed and lifted my huge stomach with both hands so that I could get through the doorway.

"What are we going to do, Shari?" I whispered. "It's those photos. You're right. But what are we going to do?"

A Few Hours Later

Dad picked me up after school. He had rented a van since I couldn't fit into the car. Dad helped me squeeze through the door. My body took up the entire backseat. The seat belt wouldn't stretch over my stomach. So we had to forget about it.

"I'm sure Dr. Weiss will have you back to normal in no time." Dad said. He was trying to be cheerful. But I could tell he was distraught. He drove slowly to Dr. Weiss's office across town. The van couldn't pick up speed because of all the weight it carried - me!

Dr. Weiss is a lovely elderly man with bright blue eyes and long white hair. He talks to all the kids as if they're two years old. He still gives

me a lollipop after each visit, even though I'm twelve! But I didn't think he'd give me a lollipop today. He tsk-tsked as I climbed on the scale. But he

couldn't get my weight. The scale didn't go high enough! He had trouble listening to my heartbeat. His stethoscope got stuck in the folds of the flab over my chest. He took all kinds of tests, his expression tense and thoughtful.

"We'll send the blood samples to the lab. We should have some answers in a few days." He shook his head and frowned. His blue eyes appeared to fade. "I've never seen anything like it, Greg. I'm completely stumped."

I wasn't stumped. I knew exactly what the problem was. As soon as I got home, I lumbered to my room and grabbed the phone. It took all my strength to raise my giant, flabby arm and hold the receiver up to the bulging flesh of my face. I punched in Shari's number. It took three tries. My finger was so fat that it kept hitting two numbers at once. She answered on the third ring.

"Hello?" Her voice floated out so tiny and weak that I could barely hear her.

"I'm coming over." I said. "And I'm bringing the camera."

"You don't have to shout!" She squeaked before adding. "Hurry, Greg. I've lost five more pounds. I'm so light; I'm afraid I'm going to float away."

"I'll be right there. We'll figure out a way to save ourselves." I assured her before hanging up. Then I carefully dug the camera out from its hiding place in my underwear drawer. I had to bend over to reach into the drawer. I was huffing and puffing, gasping for breath.

'If I get any fatter, I'll explode.' I thought, worried. Carefully gripping the camera, I lowered my bulk down the stairs. My parents were in

the den, discussing what Dr. Weiss had told Dad. "I'm going to Shari's."

"It started to rain." Mom shouted. "Take an umbrella."

"I'm only going next door!" I shouted back.

Besides, an umbrella wouldn't cover all of me. I peeked outside. It was only drizzling. I tucked the camera under the folds of my arm, pulled open the front door, and started to step out. But I stopped when I saw the dark-haired boy walking up the driveway.

It was Jon!

"Oh, no!" I murmured.

I knew why he had come. He wanted his camera back. But I couldn't give it back. I needed it to save Shari and me. I watched him walking slowly, his head down because of the rain.

'What am I going to do?' I can't let him take back his camera. I can't! *'I'll duck back inside and hide.'*

I tried to back up. I tried to back my heavy bulk into the house. But it was too late. Jon saw me.

He waved to me and started jogging toward the house. I had the camera in my hand. I carefully lowered it to the porch and stepped in front of it. I knew it would be hidden behind my enormous body. But what was I going to say to Jon? How could I convince him to let me keep the camera for a while longer?

"Hi!" He said.

"Hi." I said, my voice muffled by the thick folds of flab around my face.

"I'm looking for a boy who lives around here. His name is Greg, he's blond, and he's about my age. Do you know him? He has a camera

of mine." Jon said, stepping up to the porch. I stared at him. My mouth dropped open. I could feel my chin drop onto my chest.

"What's his name?" I choked out.

"Greg. I don't know his last name. Does he live around here?"

'He doesn't recognize me! I'm so huge; he doesn't know that I'm me!' I realized.

"Uh ... yeah. I think I know who you mean. There's a kid named Greg who lives over there." I said, pointing up the street.

"Do you know which house?" Jon asked, turning to where I pointed.

"It's about four blocks that way." I lied. "A big redbrick house. You can't miss it. It's the only brick house on the block."

"Hey, thanks." Jon said. The rain started to come down harder. He turned quickly and jogged down the driveway.

'A close call.' I thought.

I felt terrible about lying to Jon. But I had to lie. I couldn't give him back the camera was too dangerous. I watched him until he disappeared behind some hedges. Then, I reached my flabby hand down, picked up the camera, and bounced across the front yard to Shari's house.

Shari greeted me at her front door. I could see the shock in her eyes when she saw how huge I had become. I was shocked, too. I nearly cried out in surprise. She was starting to look like a stick figure! As she led the way to her room, she kept tripping over the cuffs of her jeans, which sagged down over her feet. She had tied a knot in the belt around her tiny waist in an attempt to keep her jeans from falling off.

"If I get any smaller, I'll have to wear doll clothes!" She wailed.

"Did your parents take you to a doctor?" I asked, huffing and puffing as I tried to drag my weight after her.

"Of course." She answered in her tiny, weak voice. "The doctor said to make me drink milkshakes five times a day!"

"I wish my doctor said that." I said as I lowered myself carefully onto her bed. I didn't want the bed to collapse under me. But as soon as I sat down, I heard a crunching sound followed by the sound of wood splintering, and the bed crashed loudly to the floor a second later.

"Don't worry about it." Shari said. "I don't have the strength to climb up to the bed, anyway."

"If I get any bigger." I moaned. "I won't be able to get out of the house. I really won't fit through the door."

Shari folded her hands in front of her. Her fingers were so skinny; they looked like bird claws. With her black hair hanging down from her tiny, round head and her straight pole of a body, she looked more like a mop than a person!

"What are we going to do?" Shari wailed.

"I brought this." I said, patting the camera with my fat, spongy hand. "I thought maybe."

"What good will that stupid camera do?" Shari cried. "I wish I'd never seen it! Never! Never!"

"I have an idea." I told her as I flicked a fly off one of my chins.

"What kind of an idea?" She asked, hugging herself, wrapping her skinny arms around her toothpick body.

"Let's take new pictures of ourselves." I said. "Maybe the new pictures will show us looking normal. Maybe the new images will change us back to how we were before."

"It's kind of risky, isn't it ?" She asked after a few moments of thinking it over.

"It is. But do you have a better idea?"

"Okay." Shari said after thinking it over. Then she lowered her eyes to the camera. "Let's do it."

I struggled to climb to my feet. But my arms and legs were barely strong enough to push up my huge body. Before I could move, Shari flew across the room. She grabbed the camera from my lap.

"Oh!" she cried out as she nearly dropped it. "It feels so heavy!"

"That's because you're so light." I told her. I tried again to lift my bulk off the bed but failed again.

"Sit still." Shari said. "I'll take your picture first."

"Okay. I hope the new photo shows me skinny." I said, trying to cross my fingers but couldn't as they were too fat.

"Say cheese." Shari said, aiming the camera at me.

"Don't be funny. Just take the picture." I snapped. She stared through the viewfinder before raising her finger over the shutter button. But after a moment, she lowered the camera with a sigh.

"It—it's too dangerous." She stammered.

"Shari. Take my picture!" I insisted. "Look at us! We couldn't be any worse off - could we?"

She nodded in agreement. Then, with a sigh, she raised the camera to her eye again. It felt so heavy in her skinny arms that she had to hold it up with both hands.

"Here goes." She whispered. "I hope it shows you normal again, Greg."

She snapped the picture with the flash making me blink a few times. A second later, the white square slid out from the front of the camera. She carried it over to the bed and sat down beside me.

"Let's see it!" I said, eagerly grabbing for it.

"Careful! If you fall over, you'll crush me!" Shari warned. I gasped. She was right. Sitting next to me could be extremely dangerous.

"Maybe you'd better stand up." I suggested. She climbed to her feet, swaying because she wasn't used to being so light.

"It's starting to develop." She said as she held the snapshot in front of me so we could both watch it.

The yellow filled in first. I squinted to see if I could make out my face.

Was it fat in the photo? Or back to normal? The yellow was too pale. I couldn't see my face at all. Shari and I both were frozen there, staring at the small square. We didn't move a muscle, not even a blink. But after a few seconds, I could see myself. My huge blobby face. My round, balloon body.

"Nooooo! I want to be changed back!" I shouted, horrified. Shari was shaking her tiny head sadly, still staring at the darkening photo.

"What's that on your face?" She asked. "Yuck!"

"Oh, no! My skin- it's all scaly. I look like an alligator or something!" I groaned. Shari grabbed back the photo and studied it.

"The scaly stuff is on your arms, too. It looks like reptile skin or something." She said.

And as she said that, I started to itch. I glanced down and saw red scales covering my arms. Itchy red scales, to be precise. I began to scratch. But the scratching made the scales itch even more. My skin flaked off under my fingernails.

"Oh, yuck! It itches so bad." I said as I scratched my arms and then my face. But more dry skin peeled off as I scratched.

"You're still huge- and now all your fall to the carpet. Oh, this is so horrible!" She said, examining the photo.

"Ohh! My back itches so bad!" I wailed. "But I can't reach it."

"I'm not going to scratch it for you!" Shari said. "It - it's too gross!"

"Do you want me to take a new picture of you?" I asked Shari. "Maybe you'll have better luck."

"No! No way! No new picture. It will only make things worse." She cried as she took another few steps back. Her face twisted in disgust. She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Greg. But you look so gross; I think I'm going to be sick."

I tried to scratch the back of my neck. But my arms were too fat. I just couldn't reach back there to scratch my back. I rubbed my forehead, and a big chunk of skin dropped off and bounced on the carpet.

"Let's just rip up the photos!" Shari said.

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

"Let's rip them all up. I'll bet our bodies will return to normal as soon as we rip them up." She explained as she bent to pick up the scaly new picture of me.

"Do you think so? Do you think that's all we have to do?" I asked, stopping my frantic scratching for a moment.

"Maybe." Shari answered. "It's worth a try, don't you think?"

I pulled the first two photos from my pocket. The negative of Shari and the first fat photo of me. The reasons why we were like this.

"I'll rip these two up. You tear that one. We'll see what happens." I said. Shari nodded as we held the photos up. I started to tear mine, then stopped. "Maybe if we rip them up, we'll disappear completely!"

Shari and I stared at each other. Our hands stayed in the air, ready to tear the snapshots to pieces.

But should we do it?

Real World

"Are there other ways to reverse the effects?"

"Yes. There are a couple of ways to reverse the effects." Roman answered.

"But it all depends on what that camera is showing." Neo added.

"How so?" Nora asked.

"That's a little hard to explain since it all depends on the effect. But some all you need to do is tear up the photo. Others, you need to do something else." Lucy answered.

"Like with Jaune's photo, tearing up the picture was all that was needed. But that is not the case with Greg or Shari." Cassie added.

"You'll see in a moment." Roman said. "Shari screamed NO! Don't do it!"

Story

We both lowered the snapshots.

"You're right." I said. My whole body was shaking. "It's too dangerous."

"If we tear the photos to pieces, we might be torn to pieces, too." Shari said. "Or we might disappear completely and never come

back."

"Let's not talk about what might happen to us." I said, shuddering. "Look at us. What could be worse?"

"A lot of things." Shari sighed. "We'll think of something to save ourselves, Greg. We just have to think positive."

"What did you say ?" I asked, staring at her.

"Think positive."

"Shari - you just gave me a really good idea!" I said.

Ninety Minutes Later

We carried the snapshots to Kramer's, the photo store where my brother works. It wasn't easy to walk there. I had to stop to catch my breath every few steps. And I had to scratch my scaly, peeling skin. But I also had to hold on to Shari to keep the wind from blowing her away. The walk was only about eight blocks. But it took us more than an hour. When we finally stepped inside the store, my heart sank to my knees. I didn't see Terry.

"He's in the developing lab." Mr. Kramer said as he kept staring at Shari and me. I guess we looked pretty weird, considering Sharli looked like A stick figure and I resembled an elephant.

I pulled Shari to the lab in the back of the store and knocked on the door. You can't just open the door and walk into the developing lab. If you let in the light, you destroy the film in there. We waited about five minutes before Terry finally came out. At first, he didn't recognize me. I think he forgot that I had put on four hundred pounds in the past few days.

"Yuck. What happened to your skin, Greg ?" He asked, making a disgusted face. "Have you got a rash or something?"

"I don't know." I lied. "Can you do me a favor, Terry?"

"What's the favor?" He asked.

"Can you reverse these for us?" I asked, holding up the photos of Shairi and me. He squinted at the two squares for a long while.

"I don't get you." He said finally.

"Can you take the negative and make a positive of it? And can you take the positive and make a negative?" I asked with a sigh.

Shari let out a sharp cry. She realized what my plan was. Maybe if we reversed the pictures, it would reverse our bodies. Terry would make a positive of Shari's negative, and she'd grow back to her normal size. Then he'd make a negative of my picture, and I'd shrink the way Shari had.

It seemed to make sense.

Was it worth a try? Definitely.

"I guess I could do it." Terry said, studying the two snapshots. "But I'm really busy in there. When do you need it?"

"NOW!" Shari and I both cried.

Terry stared at us, then down at the two photos. I scratched the back of my neck. My arms were so fat I could barely lift them that high. In a few hours, I knew I'd be too heavy to walk. Someone would have to wheel me around in a wheelbarrow. No - make that two wheelbarrows!

"Please!" I begged.

"I just don't have time." Terry said.

"I'll give you my allowance for the next two months!"

"Okay. I guess I can find the time. It's a deal. Wait out here." Terry said before disappearing into the lab.

While he went to work, we stood outside the door and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It honestly felt like the longest half-hour of my life.

Mr. Kramer kept staring back at us from the front counter. Shari and I tried to ignore him. I wanted to sit down. Carrying so much weight made my feet hurt. But I was afraid if I took a seat, I'd break it. And I wouldn't be able to get back up. So Shari and I stood outside the door to the lab and thought about this new plan. Would it work? Would reversing the photos reverse us? Finally, the door swung open, and Terry stepped out.

"Here." He said as he handed me the new prints. "Don't forget what you said about your allowance."

"I won't. Thanks, Terry." I promised. I gazed at the new prints. Terry had done it right. A positive of Shari smiling into the camera. A negative of me, weighing four hundred pounds.

"Now, get lost." Terry said, glancing up at the front desk. "Go ahead. Beat it before you make me lose my job."

I took Shari's hand and pulled her to the front of the store. Poor Shari. She really did feel light as a feather. She looked even paler and skinnier than when we came into the store. Her hand felt brittle bones. We stepped out of the store and stopped on the corner. I held the new prints up so we both could see them.

"Is it working?" I asked her. "Do you feel any different?"

"Not yet." She replied softly.

"Neither do I."

We stared at the new prints and waited. We stood on that corner for at least half an hour, staring and waiting. Waiting to feel different. Waiting for our bodies to change. But nothing happened. We didn't change at all.

"We're doomed." I said as a chunk of skin peeled off my forehead and dropped to the sidewalk. "Doomed."

The Following Morning

I woke up early today, before my alarm. I stretched and yawned. Then I turned and struggled to pull my huge body out of bed.

"Heave-ho!" I said, straining every muscle.

And I went flying across the room!

"Oww!" I groaned as I hit the wall, bounced off, dropped to the floor, and bounced up again. "What's going on?"

Getting up, I scrambled to the mirror and stared at the reflection of my old face. And my old body! No folds of sagging flesh. No puffed-out cheeks or bulging balloon of a belly.

It was me! I was back! I squeezed my arms, rubbed my face, and pulled my hair. I felt so happy to see myself! I leaped onto the bed and started jumping up and down, tossing up my arms and whooping and cheering at the top of my lungs.

"It worked! It worked! Yaaaaay!" I said, almost in disbelief, that reversing the photos reverted me back to normal. Mom and Dad burst into the room, still in their bathrobes, with frightened expressions on their faces.

"Greg - what's wrong?" They asked. But they both froze with bulging eyes and opened mouths when they saw me. Mom uttered a squeak of surprise. Dad goggled at me in shocked silence.

"You're-you're you again!" Mom stammered.

"You-you. You-" Dad struggled to say something, but he couldn't. He pointed a finger at me and stuttered. And then, they both rushed over and wrapped me in a tight hug.

"I knew it was something you ate." Mom said happily. "Some kind of food poisoning."

"Just an allergic reaction." Dad added, finally able to speak. "I knew you'd be fine in a day or two."

"We knew you'd be fine." Mom declared.

"Yeah. Me, too." I lied.

"You were very good during all this trouble, Greg." Mom said, wiping away a tear from her eye with the back of her hand. "You had such a good attitude."

"Yeah. Well ... I always try to think positive." I told her.

Ten Minutes Later

I gobbled down my breakfast and hurried next door to Shari's house. As I ran to the back door, she stepped out, grinning, waving her arms in triumph.

"It worked! It worked, Greg!" Shari cried happily. She came running toward me, her black hair flying behind her head, laughing and cheering.

She was back to normal.

Shari was back to normal!

Whooping and shouting, the two of us did a wild "Back to Normal" dance in her backyard. When we stopped to catch our breath, Shari turned to me.

"We'd better hurry. We're going to be late for school. I can't wait to show everyone that I'm me again." Shari said.

"Me, too! But wait, right here. I have to get something in my room. I'll be right back." I said before running back to my house.

"What are you getting?" Shari called, following me.

"The camera." Worried, Shari ran faster, caught up with me, and grabbed my shoulders.

"Greg. The camera? Why do you need the camera?"

"For revenge." I answered, narrowing my eyes with my expression turning serious.

"Greg- don't!" Shari pleaded.

I ignored her. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew what I had to do.

I ran into the house and took the stairs two at a time up to my room. I pulled the camera from its hiding place and hurried back outside. Shari was waiting for me on the sidewalk.

"Greg- this is crazy. What are you going to do?" She asked.

"I'm going to take Mr. Saur's picture." I answered, feeling an evil smile forming on my face.

"NO!" She gasped. "Greg! You can't!"

"Watch me."

"But - but - but-" She sputtered. I started walking toward the school, taking long strides. I gripped the camera tightly in both hands. "Greg - something terrible will happen!"

"I know." I said, unable to stop grinning. "Old Sourball deserves it."

"But, Greg." She said, trying to stop me. But I jogged faster, moving away from her.

"He deserves it." I repeated. "He refused to believe a true story. He called me a liar in front of the whole class. And he gave me an F. An F for a really good report."

"But, Greg-" Shari started. I didn't let her get a word in. I was too worked up. The closer we came to school, the more excited I got about my revenge plan.

"He's going to ruin my whole summer." I continued. "And he's wrong, wrong, wrong! And then, when I got so huge, Sourball was really cruel. He made jokes about me in front of everyone. He embarrassed me, Shari. He totally embarrassed me."

"Greg-"

"He wanted to hurt my feelings." I said. I could see our school through the trees in the next block. "He wanted to embarrass me in front of the whole class. He deserves what he's going to get."

"So what are you going to do?" She asked.

"He dared me to prove that the camera is evil. So I'm going to prove it - and get my revenge at the same time." I answered as I stopped at the corner.

I slipped into class just as the final bell rang. The other kids were already in their seats, just getting quiet. Mr. Saur had his back turned. He was writing something on the chalkboard. I stepped up behind him and waited for him to turn around.

My heart thudded in my chest. My hands were shaking so much I could barely hold the camera. I took a deep breath and held it. This was my big moment. My big chance.

"Mr. Saur?" I called softly. He spun around as if I had shouted.

"Greg! You're looking very slender." He cried. I ignored his words. I raised the camera to my eye.

'Time for revenge.' I thought. "I brought the camera. Remember? The camera from my report? You asked me to prove that it's evil. So here goes!"

I centered his startled face in the viewfinder. I raised my finger over the shutter button. He grabbed the camera from my hands.

"Oh, yes! The evil camera!" He declared, staring down at it. "Don't waste it on me. Let's take everyone's picture!"

"No!" I cried. He waved his hand.

"Donny and Brian - move in closer." Mr. Saur said before shoving me in front of him. "Get in the shot, Greg."

"No!" I pleaded. "Mr. Saur! NO!"

"Say cheese, everyone!" The camera flashed with the white square photo sliding out a second later.

"I think I got everyone in the shot." he said, smiling. "Now, what's going to happen?"

"Uh... we'll see." I said, swallowing hard. "We'll see."

Real World

"Wow. Talk about being an ass." Yang said.

"Yeah." Ruby and Nora agreed.

"You would think after experiencing something like that, he would toss the camera into the ocean." Pyrrha said.

"I understand Mr. Saur was being cruel, but there are better ways of handling someone like him. And now Greg got his whole class into

trouble." Weiss said.

"All because he wanted to go visit his cousins in the summer." Yatsuhashi said.

"If he simply didn't write about that camera, none of this would have happened." Ren said.

"I honestly no longer feel bad for him. He deserves what the camera is going to make." Nora said.

"After hearing this story, it makes sense why Greg and the others' friendship fell through, considering what he did." Coco said.

"Uh, that's not why their relationship fell through." Another voice clarified. Turning around, everyone became shocked, happy, and relieved when they saw Jaune walking toward them.

"JAUNE!" They shouted.

"Hey-" Jaune began but couldn't finish when Velvet, with blinding speed, tackled him to the ground in a fierce hug.

"JAUNE! YOU'RE BACK!" She said.

"Hey, Velvet. Yes, I'm back." Jaune said, coughing as his face became bright red.

"Okay, Velvet. You can let him go. He's probably not feeling well." Coco chuckled as she effortlessly pulled Velvet off Jaune before helping him up.

"Well, I feel fine, just drained." Jaune said as he walked over to the others. But while Coco sat down with the others, Jaune sat on a nearby chair. But his face darkened again when Velvet sat next to him and held his arm.

"Sorry about the whole making you disappear thing, Arc. I didn't know this camera could do that." Coco said.

"It's fine." Jaune said. "Besides, it's not like you knew about the camera."

"Good to see you safe, Jaune." Pyrrha said, smiling as Velvet leaned into Jaune.

"Thanks, Pyr." Jaune said, struggling to maintain his composure as Velvet, his crush, snuggled into him.

"Do you know where you went, Jaune?" Grady asked.

"Oh, hey, Grady, Cassie, Lucy, Vandal. I didn't see you guys." Jaune said. "Anyway, no. I do not know where I went. It was all a blur. The only thing I could make out was this strange book that had the same symbol as the book Stanley found."

"Either way, we're glad your back with us, Jaune." Weiss said.

"Thanks."

"Yeah. No one can replace our vomit boy." Yang teased, causing everyone to laugh while Jaune rolled his eyes.

"But what did you mean by that?" Ruby asked, curious.

"What do you mean, Rubes?" Jaune asked.

"You said Greg's relationship with his friends didn't fall through. How did it then?"

"We told you. Their friendship soured from somethings Greg did, and now they stay away from each other." Neo said.

"That's not true, Neo." Roman said, scratching the back of his head.

"What do you mean?" Neo asked, glaring.

"Well, after the incident with Mr. Saur; Greg and the others stayed as friends. But their friendship was strained because of what Greg did.

It slowly strengthened over time. But it didn't last. To put it short, Greg died." Jaune explained.

"He died?" The others asked, shocked.

"Yeah. But not from the camera." Grady said.

"Then how did he die?" Blake asked.

"Let's just say disappearances can be deadly. Especially if you have no control and let your emotions get the better of you like they did with Greg." Cassie answered.

"Why did you keep that from me?" Neo asked, glaring at Roman.

"I'll tell you later when we're alone." Roman nervously answered.

"Where's Shari, Bird, and Michael?" Velvet asked, still holding onto Jaune's arm.

"They're back in my hometown. They are currently in college." Jaune answered.

"So what happened next? After Mr. Saur took the photo?" Coco asked.

"The picture showed everyone as skeletons. Luckily, Shari managed to tear up the photo before anything happened." Lucy answered.

"That's good." Weiss said.

"Greg still got an F on his report, though."

"He deserved that."

"After that. What happened to the camera?" Pyrrha asked.

"No one knows. It disappeared somehow. And it only reappeared after a few years where a middle schooler named Julie Martin found

it after looking for a replacement camera." Jaune answered.

"Do you have that story?" Ruby asked.

"Yes. It's toward the back." Jaune answered.

"Want me to read it, kid? You just got back, and you said it yourself that you're feeling a bit drained." Roman asked.

"No. I got it. Besides, your voice could use some rest since you read two stories back to back." Jaune said as he grabbed the book and flipped to the correct page. "All right. A picture is worth a thousand screams-if it's taken with an evil camera that has a nasty vision of the future. Julie's future doesn't look pretty. And neither does anyone else's after they're caught in her lens!"

Notes

The Next Book will be Say Cheese and Die Screaming.

After that will be When the Ghost Howls to introduce Zwei. (And because I already have the book on hand.)

Chapter 9

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 9: Say Cheese - And Die-Screaming!

"All right. A picture is worth a thousand screams-if it's taken with an evil camera that has a nasty vision of the future. Julie's future doesn't look pretty. And neither does anyone else's after they're caught in her lens!" Jaune said as he flipped to the correct page.

"Is Greg in this story?" Pyrrha asked.

"No. This happened about three years later."

"Before or after... whatever happened to Grady?" Yang asked, smirking as Jaune blushed some more when Velvet sniggled into him.

"Before he died but after his friendship with the others fell through." Jaune answered before clearing his throat. "All right. Let's start. A young girl with a blonde ponytail ran across the school hallway toward her best friend. JULIE! WAIT UP! She shouted."

Story

"Is that a new camera?" The girl asked as she reached her friend.

"It's one of my old cameras." Julie answered, shaking her head. "Dad says he'll buy me a new one if I get the big assignment from Mr. Webb."

"Big assignment?" Reena asked, blinking. I gave her a light shove.

"Reena, I've only been talking about it for months. Remember? To shoot the entire student body for the big two-page spread in the Tiger? That's the name of our yearbook."

"I thought Mr. Webb already chose David Blank for that." Reena said, scrunching her face.

"Well, you thought wrong. That's why I'm hurrying to the Tiger office. I've got an awesome idea. No way Mr. Webb can say no to it. David can sit on his bum and watch me take the photo!"

"You don't like David - do you?" Reena asked, laughing, causing me to roll my eyes.

"Does a lettuce like a goat?"

"Goat? I don't get that, Julie." Reena said, confused. With her light blonde hair and big green eyes, Reena is very pretty. I think she's the prettiest girl at Twin Forks Middle School. And Reena's smart, too. But she only understands straight talk.

"I meant David tries to gobble up everything. He wants to be the only star. Mr. Webb asked me to shoot the bake sale in the gym last week. And when I showed up, guess who was there."

"David?"

"You got it."

"He's very competitive." Reena said before grinning. "But I think he's kind of cute."

"Cute?" I stuck my finger down my throat. "With that bright orange hair and those orange freckles? He looks like a carrot! "

"You have vegetables on the brain." Reena said.

"No, I've got pictures on the brain. I can be just as competitive as David. I really want to take that big photo. That's why I want to get to the yearbook office before David does." I turned and started to jog down the hall. It was nearly three thirty, and the school had emptied out.

"Julie-" Reena called after me. "Are we still going bike riding on Saturday?"

"I've got to watch Sammy in the morning. We can ride all afternoon." I answered. Sammy is my little brother.

I turned the corner and bumped right into the Sneer Sisters. Actually, Becka and Greta aren't sisters. They're best friends, and I've never seen them apart. I call them the Sneer Sisters because they both always sneer when they see me, like I smell like rotten meat or something. And they're always so totally mean to me. They even look a little alike. They are both tall and very skinny and have long noses and kind of pointy chins similar to witches' chins.

"Hi, Ju - Ju." Becka said, sneering. I gritted my teeth. She knows I hate to be called Ju - Ju. That's what I called myself when I was too little to say the name Julie. Greta pointed at my mouth. "Ju - Ju, you have something on your front teeth."

"Is it gone?" I asked after rubbing my teeth. Greta nodded.

"Yeah. It was your finger!" They both slapped high fives and cackled like

that was the funniest joke in history.

"Where did you get that joke? First grade or second?" I asked before pushing past them and hurrying down the hall with my camera bouncing in front of me.

The yearbook office was the last door on the left. I grabbed the knob, twisted it, and burst inside. And then I gasped when I was blinded by an explosion of white. OK. It wasn't an explosion. A few seconds later, I started to see again. And David Blank slowly came into focus. He was standing next to Mr. Webb. He had his camera raised. And a big grin on his carroty face.

"That's a lesson for you, Julie. That's how you take someone by surprise. An awesome candid shot." David said.

"David - you nearly blinded me!" I cried. I still had white flashes in my eyes.

"The look on your face!" He said as he stared at the viewscreen on the back of his camera before sharing it with Mr. Webb. "Like something in a horror movie."

"You're a horror movie!" I shot back angrily. I was so disappointed that David was there. I elbowed him out of the way and tried to squeeze next to Mr. Webb. "You're leaving, right?"

"I'm just hanging out." David said, shrugging. "Mr. Webb and I were talking about some yearbook ideas. "

Mr. Webb took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He is very tall, lanky, skinny and has a narrow face and short black hair. Some kids have a nickname for him. They call him The Needle because he really does look like one. He has a soft voice. He always seems to stop and think for a long time before he answers a question. And he's constantly taking off his glasses and putting them back on. A nervous habit, I guess. I've never had him as a teacher. But I think he's a good yearbook adviser. He's very fair. And he's always ready to listen to new ideas.

"My dad got me a new lens for my Pentax." David said. "I've got ten times zoom on this camera. And twenty times zoom on my other camera."

"Don't brag or anything." I said, annoyed. He thinks he's way cool because his dad is the manager of Camera World at the mall. Mr. Webb pushed his glasses up on his nose and turned to me.

"Julie, you got some nice shots of the wrestling team last week." He said. "So did David."

"I thought the wrestling team was my assignment." I said.

"Just thought I'd back you up." He said, grinning. "You know. In case that little camera of yours broke or something."

Have you ever wanted to clobber a kid that pisses you off daily? I sure want to right now.

"You said you have an idea you want to show me?" Mr. Webb asked. I reached into my backpack and pulled out the plans I had drawn. If only David would disappear in a flash of white light!

"It's for the picture of the whole student body." I said. "I had this idea about using the new swimming pool."

"You want to take the picture from underwater? That's awesome! " David laughed.

"Give me a break. You know they haven't filled the new pool yet. There's no water in it." I said as I spread my drawing out on the table. Mr. Webb bent over to study it. He scratched his head and squinted at it.

"Is that you on the high diving board?" He asked.

"Yeah. See? We get everyone standing in the pool. Fifth grade in front. Then sixth. Then seventh at the back. And I use a wide angle and shoot down at everyone from the high board."

"And then you dive into the crowd? Awesome!" David said, laughing. I ignored him but desperately wished I could clobber him into the pool.

"There might be some safety problems." Mr. Webb said. "The high diving board is-"

"It's a very wide platform up there." I said. "With railings on both sides. No way I could slip."

"I think Julie and I should both go up there and shoot." David said as he leaned over the drawing, blocking Mr. Webb's view. "She can use her old-fashioned wide angle. And I'll use my Konica square shooter."

I wanted to pound him into the ground. David is such a total pig.

"The platform isn't that wide." I said. "There's only room for one person up there. And since it's my idea..."

"I know!" David said. "Let's make it a contest. Between Julie and me."

"A contest?" I asked, surprised.

"Whoever has the most pictures accepted for the yearbook - wins." David said. "The winner gets to take the big picture from the high board."

"Well, I guess that would be a fair way to decide." Mr. Webb said with a smile forming on his face. "OK, you have one week."

'Fair?! It wasn't fair at all! The pool was my idea. But how could I back down?' I thought, outraged.

"OK. Done deal. We'll have a contest." I said, resisting the urge to punch David in the face.

I folded up my plan and shoved it back into my backpack. Then I waved goodbye to the two of them and left the room. As I walked home, I couldn't think about anything else. I wanted to win. I really wanted to be the one up on that high board with everyone in school looking up at me. How was I to know that before too long, I'd be falling to my doom?

Saturday Afternoon

The sun beamed down from a clear blue sky. It was the first warm day of spring. Reena and I couldn't wait to climb on our bikes and

ride all around town. We pedaled past the school, then turned right and coasted downhill toward Fairfax Park. We were both in shorts and T-shirts. It felt great to pretend it was summer. We had to brake to slow down at the bottom of the steep hill.

"How was Sammy this morning?" Reena asked.

"The usual." I said. "He was Sammy. What else?"

"Your brother is a little spoiled."

"And a little whiny." I added. "And a little obnoxious. Mom always says he's just being Sammy. I guess that means he can get away with anything."

"Baby of the family." Reena said.

We rode through the park, in and out of the shade from the old tangled trees that hang over the street. Then we rode past houses where some of our friends lived. Some kids were washing a car with a garden hose at the corner. We turned, and a red car pulled up beside us. The back window rolled down. And who should poke their heads out but my best buddies, Becka and Greta.

"Ju - Ju!" They both called. "Ju - Ju!"

"You got rid of your training wheels!" Becka shouted as Greta spat her bubble gum at me.

'Missed.' I thought as the gum missed me by a few feet.

"Bye, Ju - Ju!" The car roared away, with the girls laughing wildly. I rolled my eyes and started pedaling hard. Reena raced to catch up to me, her blonde hair flying behind her.

"What did you ever do to them?" She asked.

"I know what it is." I said. "Remember my birthday party last autumn? The bowling party?"

"I remember." Reena said. "I dropped the ball on my foot."

"Well, my mom said I could only invite five kids. And you know, Becka and Greta were never in my top five. They're closer to my bottom five."

"So you didn't invite them." Reena said, laughing.

"Right. They've been horrible to me ever since." I said as we slowed to a stop at a corner. The street sign was lying on its side on the grass. "Where are we?"

We both squinted into the afternoon sun. I saw tiny houses jammed close together on both sides of the street. The front gardens were small squares, mostly of tall weeds. One house had cardboard across all its windows. The garden was cluttered with tin cans and other rubbish. A mean-looking dog, tall and scrawny, barked at us from a dirt driveway, tugging at a chain leash. Two young boys were tossing stones against the side of a little shingled house.

"I don't know this neighborhood." I said. "We never rode this far before."

"It's kind of creepy." Reena said. But then her eyes grew wide. "Hey - check it out! A garage sale!"

She didn't wait for me. She pedaled up the pebble driveway, where red and blue balloons bobbed in the wind. Reena can't resist a tag sale. She's totally into old shoes and hats and vintage clothes. I don't know what she does with all the stuff she buys. Reena's lucky she has big closets in her room.

The red brick house was small and square. The screen door was ripped and hung half open. A stuffed monkey stared out of the dusty front

window. A huge red-faced woman in a tight-fitting yellow dress sat in a beach chair in front of the garage. She waved to us as we climbed

off our bikes, but she didn't get up. She fanned herself with a folded-up newspaper. Then she used it to point to the tables of stuff.

"Everything is half off." She said in a hoarse voice. "I didn't have time to tag it. Just ask me the price."

We set our bikes down on the pebble driveway. No one else was around. Down the street, the angry dog kept barking. Reena walked over to a rack of old dresses and coats. It all looked pretty ragged to me. But Reena likes pawing through that stuff.

I stopped at a table in front of the open garage door. It was stacked high with yellow, old-Time magazines and sheet music. I picked up some sheet music and looked through it. My dad plays the piano, and he collects old songs. But these were too smelly and falling apart. Yuck. I dropped them back on the table, but my hands still smelled skunky. I turned and saw Reena trying on straw hats. She's so awesome-looking; hats look great on her. Whenever I try one of hers on, I look like a little girl playing dress up.

There were shelves of old board games and action figures in the garage. I checked out an old werewolf card game called Bite My Face! Really dumb. Then in the grey light at the back of the garage, I spotted something on a low shelf. It was a camera. I bent and picked it up.

"Weird." I muttered.

It was definitely old. It was square, like an old box camera. Bigger than my digital camera and heavier. It was metal, covered in black leather. I turned it over and saw a built-in flash at the top.

"Wonder what kind of film it takes." I muttered. I'd never seen a camera like it. I had five or ten dollars in my backpack. Would that be enough to buy the old camera? I carried it up to the woman in the beach chair. "Is this for sale?"

The woman's eyes bulged. Her chin trembled. "NO!" She screamed. "Put it DOWN! You don't want that! Put it down - NOW! "

Real World

"Well, I guess Julie found the evil camera." Weiss said.

"But hopefully, nothing too bad happens to her. I already like her far better than Greg." Ruby said.

"I can't say the same for David." Pyrrha said.

"Yeah. It's only been a few chapters, and I already want to pummel him into the ground." Yang said.

"That was in the past. David got better in time." Grady said.

"He's not so much of an ass now, especially when it comes to photography." Cassie added.

"But the occasional slap to the head to keep him in line is still needed." Lucy said.

"Back to the story." Jaune said. "Julie stuttered out, 'N-No problem.' The woman waved at her with her face beet red."

Story

'What's up with this camera?' I wondered as I trotted back into the garage. I bent to set it back down on the low shelf and felt a tap on my shoulder. I let out a startled cry before turning around and seeing a girl standing behind me. She was about twelve like me, big and red-faced like the woman outside. Her scraggly brown hair fell over her eyes. She wore baggy jeans and a pink sweatshirt that said MOMMY'S PRINCESS on the front in sparkly letters. "Huh?"

"You want that camera?" She whispered.

"Well ... I don't know." I murmured. "If there's something wrong with it ..."

"Go ahead. Take it." She said, shoving the camera into my arms.

"How much?"

"No charge." She answered, shaking her head. She then gave me a push to the driveway. "Just take it away before my mom sees."

I picked up my bike and stuck the old camera into my backpack. The woman didn't see. She was pouring herself a tall drink from a big plastic pitcher. Reena ran over and lifted her bike from the driveway.

"Nothing good here." She whispered. "Let's go."

We called "bye" to the woman and pedaled away. At the street, I turned and looked back to the garage. The daughter was standing there stiffly, just staring at us. I waved to her. But she didn't wave back.

One Hour Later

Mom greeted us as we stepped into my house. My mom is dark-haired like me, except she wears hers the length of bristles on a hairbrush. She's short and a little chubby and has non-stop energy. I mean, she never sits down.

"Reena, would you like to stay for dinner?" She asked.

"Sure, thanks." Reena replied.

"What are we having?" I asked.

"Just pizza. I've been cleaning the attic all day. No time to prepare a feast." Mom answered, shrugging. That's the other thing about my mom. She never sits down - and she never stops cleaning out rooms.

"No peppers this time!" Sammy came bursting into the room, whining as usual. "I hate peppers! Even if you pull them off, you can still taste them."

Sammy looks like a junior version of Mom and me. He's short with dark hair and has brown eyes and a gap in his front teeth - like I had before my braces.

"OK. No peppers." Mom promised. I pulled the old camera from my backpack. I was eager to check it out.

"Where'd you get that?" Sammy asked. He made a grab for it, but I swiped it out of his reach. Pouting, he moved to pose in front of the fireplace with his tongue sticking out and eyes crossed. "Take my picture! Hurry! Take my picture."

"It doesn't have any film." I said. "I just got it. Besides, when I do get film, I'm taking Reena's picture - not yours. "

I turned and aimed the lens at Reena. Then I pretended to take her picture and pushed the shutter button. The flash went off - a bright white. I heard a metal hum - and a square of paper came sliding out of the front of the camera.

"What's that? You broke it! Ha - ha! You broke your new camera!" Sammy said as he did a little dance around Reena and me. I pulled out the square. It was cardboard and had a smooth, glossy front.

"Julie didn't break it." Mom said. "Haven't you ever seen one of these? It's a self-developing camera."

"A what?" Sammy said, confused.

"Watch. The picture slides out. Then it will slowly develop." Mom said. "These used to be popular before digital cameras."

We all stared at the little square in my hand. It began to darken, and then colors appeared. Slowly, the picture developed, and we could

see Reena.

"Nice colors." I said. "Very soft. This is awesome!"

"Oh, wow." Reena said. "It's a nice shot - but I have red-eye."

I studied the photo. Yes, Reena looked great. I don't think she can take a bad picture. But her eyes were glowing bright red.

"You look like a freak!" Sammy laughed before trying to grab the camera again. "Let me take a picture!"

"It isn't a toy, Sammy." I said, turning away from him. I then tugged Reena to the stairs. "Come to my room. Bet I can get rid of the red-eye."

"On the computer?" Reena asked.

"Yes. I'll scan the picture into my computer and fix the red-eye."

We hurried to my room and closed the door so Sammy wouldn't follow us. I scanned the picture into the computer. I have a professional program called Photo Master Plus I'm learning how to use. I gazed at the image on the screen and began to adjust it.

"Weird." I muttered.

"What's up?" Reena asked. She put her hands on my shoulders and leaned over me.

"I can't darken your eyes." I said. "I should be able to fade the red glow. But it won't adjust at all."

"OH, HELP! OWWWWW! MY EYES!" Reena shrieked. I gasped and spun around. Reena raised her hands to her eyes and started to scream at the top of her lungs. "MY EYES! HELP ME! MY EYES! "

"What's wrong?" I asked as I jumped up from my chair. Reena pressed her hands over her eyes.

"HELP ME! Julie - my eyes are BURNING! Oh, HELP ME!" Reena shouted. I grabbed her hands gently and tugged them down. When I saw her eyes, my breath caught in my throat. Her eyes were glowing red like fire! "Help me! Oh, it hurts! It really hurts!"

"M - maybe the flash was too bright. You were standing so close to the camera." I stammered. I pulled Reena into my bathroom. I soaked a washcloth with cold water and pressed it over her eyes.

"It isn't helping! My eyes - they're BURNING! It hurts SO MUCH!" She shrieked. I took the cloth away. Her eyes were still glowing bright red.

"Here. More cold water." I said as I placed the washcloth back on her face. Then I pulled her downstairs to Mom. "Her eyes are burning. They're all red."

"Let me see." Mom pulled the cloth away. She blinked a few times when she saw the red glow. "Something irritated them badly. Do you have allergies?"

"NO! No allergies! Please - HELP ME!" Reena shook her head. Her whole body was trembling.

"I have some eye drops in my room. Julie, they're on my dresser." Mom said. Nodding, I raced to her room, grabbed the eye drops, and returned a second later. But to our horror, they didn't help at all. "Call Reena's parents. Maybe they can get her to an eye doctor. I've never seen anything like this!"

"Call me later. When the burning stops." I said after we helped Reena into the car. I watched them drive away. I had a tight feeling in my stomach. I couldn't get Reena's frightened screams out of my ears. In my bedroom, I picked up the snapshot. I stared at Reena's smiling face with the red, glowing eyes.

'How totally weird.' I thought.

After dinner, I was still thinking about Reena. I suddenly remembered I had an assignment from Mr. Webb. I was supposed to be at the gym shooting the girls' basketball game for the yearbook. I grabbed two of my cameras and stuffed them in my bag. Then I jumped on my bike and raced to the gym.

I got there just in time. The game was nearly over. Our Tigers were losing to the Bay Meadow Stingrays. I saw Karla Mayer, our best player. She stole the ball and dribbled down the court. She stopped at the line and sent up an easy three-pointer. The bleachers were about half full of kids. Most of them started to stomp their feet and chant, "Karla kills! Karla kills! Karla kills!"

I decided to take some shots from the top of the bleachers. I took out my best digital camera and hurried up the steep steps. I let out a sharp cry as a red-and-white trainer stuck out and tripped me.

"Ow." I said as I banged my knee hard. I turned around and saw who was wearing the trainer - Becka. She and Greta grinned at me.

"Not too klutzy, are you?" Becka laughed.

"Ju - Ju, too bad. Did you fall on your camera?" Greta shouted over the noise of the crowd. I should have ignored them.

"Becka, don't you have awfully big feet for a girl?" I said.

Then I glanced at my camera. Oh, wow. I really did fall on it. The lens was cracked. Shaking my head, I climbed to the top of the bleachers. I gazed at the scoreboard. The Tigers were losing 36 to 45. Karla would have to go to work. Good photo ops. I reached into my bag for the other camera - and let out a cry.

'Oh, no! The weird, old camera. I didn't mean to bring it.' I thought, worried.

Well ... I had no choice. I had to use it. I knew I couldn't snap dozens of shots with the old thing. I needed to wait for one or two great

moments.

I had to get a long shot of Karla running down the floor. Could the old camera do it? I raised it to my face - then groaned. David Blank! He had a blue baseball cap pulled down over his red hair. But I still recognized him easily. What was he doing here? David was on the floor next to the players' bench. He had two cameras strapped around his neck. And he was snapping photo after photo.

"You creep!" I shouted.

He knew this was my assignment. David would do anything to win our contest. But this just wasn't fair. The Stingrays scored again. The crowd grew quiet. Everyone was waiting for Karla to make a move.

I glanced down the bleachers. Becka was on her mobile phone. Greta was searching for something in her bag. They weren't even watching the game. I held the old camera ready. A few seconds later, Karla came dribbling full speed down the center of the floor.

This was my shot. I kept her in the viewscreen as she flew towards the basket. She leaped high and sent a lay-up to the hoop. I pushed the shutter button just as her feet left the floor. The camera flashed. The film came sliding out. I grabbed it and watched it develop.

"Weird! How did I mess up?" I wondered.

The picture showed Karla's arm all by itself. Where was the rest of her body? Her face? How could I just capture her arm? A loud CRAAAAACK made the kids in the bleachers gasp. And rising over that, I heard a high wail, a long, shrill scream of pain. I turned- and saw Karla dangling from the basket rim.

HANGING BY HER ARM!

Karla shrieked and cried. Tears rolled down her face. Even from the top of the bleachers, I could see that her arm was horribly broken. It hung there at a totally strange angle. Players from both teams stood

beneath her, screaming and crying. Kids were covering their eyes. The coaches hurried to lower her to the floor. The referee kept blowing her whistle, again and again, like a siren.

Wailing in agony, Karla lay sprawled on her back on the gym floor, the bones of her arm poking out through her skin. Gasping for breath, I realized I had the snapshot clenched tightly in my hand. I raised it to my face and stared at it. Stared at Karla's arm, ALL BY ITSELF!

And suddenly, I felt sick.

Four paramedics in white uniforms arrived a short while later. They couldn't keep the shock off their faces when they saw Karla. Coach Ambers was down on the floor beside her, trying to hold Karla still.

Karla was silent now. I thought maybe she was in shock or something.

The gym had emptied out. Both teams had been sent to the locker rooms. The medics lifted Karla onto a stretcher. I could see that her arm was bent almost backward.

I tucked the photo into my bag. The referee had left the gym. But I could still hear her shrill whistle ringing in my ear. I thought about Reena. About her red-eye. And then I pictured Karla's arm again. A deep shudder ran down my body. Maybe I should have listened to that woman's warning. Maybe I should have left the camera in her garage. This *CAN'T* be a coincidence! There's something evil about this old camera ...

I didn't see David until he was right in front of me. He grabbed the old camera from my hand.

"Hey!" I cried out and tried to take it back. But he swiped it out of my reach.

"Whoa! This is totally awesome!" He said. "Where did you get this? Let me try it!"

"NO!" I screamed. I made another grab for it. Too late. David aimed the camera at me and FLASHED it in my face.

Real World

"Wow. This must be some kind of record. A few chapters in, and already this kid is starting to get on my nerves." Yang said.

"But you can't be too mad at him. He's a kid, so he doesn't know better... or common things." Roman said.

"And he didn't even know about the camera nor would have believed it." Neo added.

"Wait. That reminds me." Blake said before turning to Jaune. "Can you modify the photos?"

"In what way?" Jaune asked.

"Changing details like how Julie planned on doing." Yatsuhashi answered.

"Oh. In that case, no. Aside from turning the photos into a negative or positive, you can't do anything to them. For some reason, they're resistant to any other kind of tempering."

"And before you ask." Grady interjected. "We're not sure if the camera can adapt. There were a few tests, but they proved nothing."

"So, either changing the photo to the opposite or destroying it are our only options at the moment." Coco said.

"Pretty much." Roman said.

"But back to the story." Jaune said. "Julie closed her eyes yet could still see the bright, white flash. And a second later, she heard the

photo slide out."

Story

"Is this a toy? This is Sammy's camera, right?" David asked, laughing as I opened my eyes.

"It's very old." I said. "I have to take it back. There's something wrong with it."

"Look. Something popped out of it. Does it squirt water, too?" David asked, rolling the camera around in his hands.

"You're not funny." I said. And then I saw what he was looking at. It was the square of film. It didn't slide all the way out. It was stuck halfway in the camera. "See? It's broken. I'm going to return it-"

I stopped. My breath caught in my throat. A sharp pain wrapped around my middle. It felt as if I were wearing a heavy belt. And the belt kept tightening and tightening ... and tightening. I made a groaning sound. I couldn't breathe. I doubled over. The pain shot around me. I felt as if I'd been cut in half!

"Julie? Julie?" I felt David's hands on my shoulders. "Are you OK? What's wrong?"

I couldn't straighten up. I couldn't talk. Or breathe. Cut in half... cut in half... Suddenly, I realized what I had to do. Fighting the pain, I struggled to raise myself. I grabbed the camera. The pain tightened around my middle.

"Julie? Do you need help?" I could hear David's voice. It sounded far away. Yet, I could tell he sounded genuinely concerned. "Julie? Does something hurt? Should I get someone?"

I couldn't answer. The pain tightened my jaw and every muscle in my body. I saw red. Then black. I knew I was about to pass out. Gritting my teeth, I grabbed the film square. And I tugged it hard, pulled it the

rest of the way out of the camera. Will it work? Will the pain go away now? I gritted my teeth and waited... waited...

No.

The photo fell from my hand. I bent double, squeezing my sides. The pain tightened around me. It felt like a hot wire burning into my skin. And then... the pain vanished. It didn't fade away slowly. It just disappeared. So suddenly, I gasped and jerked up straight, blinking in surprise. I took in a long, deep breath, then another. I rubbed a hand around my waist. It felt perfectly fine again.

"Are you OK now? Julie?" David asked. He had gone so pale; his freckles had faded into his skin. I didn't answer. I gripped the camera tightly against my chest. Then I spun away from David and ran across the gym floor. "Hey! What's your problem?"

I didn't answer. I kept running until I was outside in the car park, breathing in the cool, fresh night air. I knew what my problem was. It was the camera. First Reena, then Karla... then me. The camera was evil. It hurt people. I had to get rid of it. I had to take it back to that strange woman.

I held the camera tightly against me and pedaled my bike home, riding with one hand. A car rolled past with loud music pouring out of the open windows. A girl waved to me from the passenger seat. But I didn't wave back. I tossed my bike against the side of the garage. Breathing hard, I ran into the house through the kitchen door. I planned to hurry up to my room and hide the camera before anyone saw me. But Sammy jumped out as I stepped into the living room. He had an ugly rubber skeleton mask over his face.

"Take my picture - or you die!" Sammy rasped. He struck a pose with both hands raised and curled like claws.

"Sammy, since when is it Halloween?" I asked.

"I'm not Sammy. I'm the Silver Skull. Take my picture, or I'll crush you with my Skull Vision." I shuddered. Poor Sammy. If I took his picture with this evil camera, he probably would become a skeleton!

"Out of my way." I didn't mean to push him so hard. But I was desperate to get the camera hidden away in my room.

"Hey - you're skeleton meat! "Sammy shouted, waving his fist angrily. "You will feel the wrath of the Silver Skull!"

That made me laugh. He's a spoiled brat, but he's cute. I crossed my room and pulled open the closet door. I had a tall heap of dirty clothes in the back that I'd forgotten about. I buried the camera under the mountain of jeans and shirts. There's no way Sammy would find it there.

My heart was pounding like a drum. I knew I wouldn't feel normal again until I returned the evil thing. At least it couldn't do any more harm buried under a ton of smelly clothes. I dropped onto my bed with a weary sigh. I pulled my mobile out, clicked it open, and called Reena.

"Are your eyes better?" I asked.

"No, they're not." Reena answered sharply. "All thanks to you!"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Reena snapped. "My eyes are still glowing like a freak. And still burning."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I can't read. I can't watch TV. I can't do my homework!" Reena shouted. "And I can't go to school because I can't let anyone see me like this!"

"Reena, I'm really sorry-"

"Sorry?" Reena cried. "Sorry? Julie, that woman warned you not to take the camera. But you think you know it all. You think you can do whatever you want. Well ... look what you did to me!"

"Reena, please-"

"The doctor never saw anything like this!" Reena screamed. "You - you ruined my life, Julie!"

"But - why are you talking to me like this?" I asked, "We're friends and-"

"No, we're not." Reena replied. "We're not friends anymore. No way."

I couldn't believe she said that. I realized my whole body was trembling. I could barely hold the phone to my ear. I could hear her sobbing into the phone.

"Reena, listen to me." I pleaded. "I'm taking the camera back to that house tomorrow. Will you come with me? We can ask that woman about your eyes."

"Julie, get lost!" Reena said in a low, cold voice. And she clicked off her phone. I didn't realize it at the moment, but I was crying when Reena told me we were no longer friends.

The Next Day

The next day, school dragged on forever. I kept thinking about the camera hidden away in my closet. And I really missed Reena. Her telling me to get lost tied my stomach in knots every time I thought about it.

After school, I ran all the way home. I wanted to get there before Sammy. I dived into my closet and tossed the dirty clothes aside. Then I grabbed the camera and headed to the garage to get my bike.

And wouldn't you know it? Flat tire.

I didn't care. The camera was going to be returned today if I had to crawl! I stuffed it into my backpack and started to walk. A calm wind blew in my face. It made the tall trees in the front gardens sway and creak. The sun kept disappearing behind dark clouds. I was pretty sure I remembered how to get there. I walked past my school. Some boys from my class were tossing frisbees on the front lawn. Past the school, I turned and walked down the steep hill toward Fairfax Park. A few kids I didn't recognize were taking turns skateboarding down the hill. I wished I were having fun, too.

I felt a couple of cold raindrops on my forehead as I stepped into the park. The dark clouds spread across the sky. The wind grew colder. Turn around, a voice in my head whispered. Julie, go home.

"No!" I shouted.

I kept walking. The trees swayed and whispered as I made my way through the park. The wind swirled, but the rain held off. I hurried through the park and then walked through a neighborhood of small, square houses. Was I on the right street?

Yes. I could see the woman's red brick house halfway down the next block. I waited for a yellow school bus to pass. Then I started to cross the street. I took a few steps and stopped when I heard a cough behind me. I spun around, but there was no one there. Weird.

I crossed the rest of the way. I started to walk faster since I could see the house. Almost there! But I stopped again when I heard the scrape of footsteps. Soft thuds on the pavement. Again, I turned. The street was lined with slender young trees. Did someone slip behind one of them? I turned and took a few more steps. I was almost to the woman's driveway. I heard more soft footsteps behind me. A chill shot down my back.

I'm being followed!

The rain started to fall. I spun around. My eyes darted from tree to tree.

"Who's there?" I shouted, but the rain muffled my voice.

No answer.

"I know you're there! Who is it?"

No reply.

I shivered. I lowered my head against the rain and ran up the pebble driveway. The garage door was closed. Someone had scrawled a big red X on the front. I turned and saw the stuffed monkey staring out the front window. Behind the stuffed animal, the house was dark.

Raindrops pattered the window. They sounded like soft drumbeats.

I glanced behind me. I didn't see anyone. But I knew someone was there, watching me. It wasn't my imagination. With another shiver, I rang the doorbell. I could hear it echo inside the house. I waited a few seconds. Then rang it again.

No answer.

I pulled open the torn screen door. Then I raised my fist and knocked hard on the front door. The door swung open. I peeked inside.

"Hello? Anyone home? Hello?"

Silence.

Just the patter of rain behind me. I stepped into the small, square living room and squinted into the darkness. But what I saw caused me to gasp. The room was totally bare. No furniture at all. The stuffed monkey sat on the windowsill. Nothing else in the room. Not even a rug on the floor.

"Hello? Anybody here?"

My voice echoed in the empty room. I jogged into the kitchen. Nothing in there, either. A single pot stood on the stove; its insides

burned black. Even the sink tap had been taken away. With a sigh, I leaned against the wall. Rainwater dripped down my forehead. I brushed it off with the back of one hand.

'They moved away.' I realized. The woman and her daughter had a garage sale and then cleared out. "Now what?"

I gripped the evil camera in both hands. No way I could return it to them now. So what should I do with it? I can't take it home. It's too dangerous. It didn't take me long to decide to leave it there. I started to feel better as soon as I made the decision. Back in the living room, I turned the stuffed monkey around. And I lowered the camera to its lap.

I backed away. I had a smile on my face. It felt so good to leave the camera. The monkey's stare seemed to follow me as I backed out the door. I closed the front door and then the screen door. The rain had stopped. The sun was breaking out through the clouds. Things were looking better already!

Home

By the time I arrived, I had a couple of hours before dinner time. I felt too restless to sit down and do my homework. I grabbed my digital camera and my extra lens and headed to school.

I needed to take some interesting shots for the yearbook. No way was I going to let David win our contest! I found some kids Rollerblading to loud hip-hop music in the teachers' car park. I took some good shots of them. I tried to capture how much fun they were having.

Then I photographed a bunch of seventh graders playing a baseball game on the football field. It was a pretty out-of-control game. The grass was still wet from the rain, and they kept slipping, sliding, and falling on their bums. But it led to some good snaps.

"David, you're toast." I muttered to myself as I headed home.

I couldn't wait to download the photos onto my computer. Then I'd print them and bring the best ones to Mr. Webb tomorrow. Mom and Dad were in the kitchen. Dad was at the sink, peeling carrots. Mom was stirring something on the stove.

"What's up?" Dad asked, but then he let out a shout. "Ouch! Can't they make a carrot peeler that doesn't scrape your fingers to shreds? Look! I'm bleeding!"

Dad isn't really good in the kitchen. I don't know why he keeps volunteering to help.

"About ten minutes till dinner time." Mom said.

"No problem." I said. "Dad, do you need a plaster?"

"I need ten!" He answered, yet he kept scraping away. I hurried up to my room. I carried the digital camera to my desk and set it down next to my computer. But something caught my eye. I spun around and felt my heart sink.

"NOOO-!" I shouted, shocked. The stuffed monkey! It sat on my dresser with the evil camera on its lap!

Real World

"Wait. I thought you said the camera didn't have any powers outside of making bad things happen and being indestructible." Coco said.

"We're not too sure about that." Cassie said.

"What do you mean?" Ruby asked.

"We're not 100% sure of everything the camera can do. And even the things we've seen it do, we're not sure if it was the camera's doing or someone else's." Roman answered.

"The only things we *are* sure about is what it can do to people and that it is indestructible." Grady added.

"But what about the girl and lady? What happened to them?" Nora asked.

"We have no idea." Lucy said.

"When we went to check the place, we found something really, really strange." Roman answered.

"And what's that?" Pyrrha asked.

"No one lived in that house for about twenty years before the day Julie discovered the camera."

"B-but that's impossible. There should be a trace, records, or something left behind." Weiss said.

"We thought so too. But that just led us to an even stranger discovery." Neo said.

"I'm almost scared to ask at this point. What did you find?" Ren asked.

"The 'house' was never really a house. It was for something else entirely, and we don't know what. In fact, it was never even finished according to the documents we managed to get our hands on." Grady answered.

"Is it still there?" Velvet asked.

"Yes." Jaune hesitantly answered.

"Did you ever try to take it down?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Let's just say there is something there that's keeping the remaining Grimm far away." Jaune answered before clearing his throat. "Anyway, Let's continue. But that's impossible, Julie shouted. She blinked a few times, hoping the monkey would disappear. But it didn't."

Story

The monkey and the camera were still there. How did they get there? How? My chest felt fluttery. My heart was racing. I grabbed the camera and bolted down the stairs with it. I burst into the kitchen, breathing hard.

"Mom? Dad? Was someone here?" I asked. They both looked up from the counter.

"Someone?" They asked, confused.

"In my room." I said. "Was someone in my room?"

"Yeah. The Silver Skull was there!" Sammy exclaimed. "The Silver Skull goes everywhere!"

"Give me a break." I snapped. "I'm serious!"

"I've been here all afternoon, Julie. I didn't see or hear anyone. Were you expecting someone?" Mom answered after shaking her head.

"No." I said. "It's ... hard to explain. I-"

There's no way I could expect them to believe me about the camera. They're both accountants for an insurance company. Know what that means? It means they're the kind of people who don't believe in evil cameras. Sammy jumped out from under the table. He dropped the two action figures he'd been playing with. He tore over to me and tried to grab the camera out of my hands.

"Give it." Sammy said. "Give it up. I want to try it."

"Here's a new concept for you." I said after gently pushing him away. " It's called mine and yours. Do you know the difference between mine and yours? Did they ever teach that to you on Sesame Street?"

"You're a jerk face baboon." Sammy pouted.

"Don't call names." Dad warned.

"Why won't you let Sammy try your camera?" Mom asked. "He isn't going to break it."

"Yes, I am!" Sammy said. Talk about a jerk face baboon!

I didn't answer Mom. I spun around and ran back up to my room with it.

I hid it again under the pile of dirty clothes. But I knew that wasn't good enough. My little brother is a terrible snoop. I knew he'd find it. I knew that sooner or later, he'd get into terrible trouble with it. I had to get the evil thing out of the house. I had to put it someplace where it couldn't magically return. But ... where would that be? Where?

Three Hours Later

It was nearly bedtime, but I wasn't tired. I kept picturing the camera on the floor of my closet. I couldn't stop thinking about Reena and Karla. About the horrible pain, the camera had given me. I knew I wouldn't sleep until the evil thing was removed from the house. I tiptoed to the closet. I didn't want Mom or Dad to hear me.

The floor creaked under my feet. The only sound in the house was the swish of the filmy white curtains fluttering at my open window. I peered out at a purple sky with no moon or stars. A soft breeze made the dark trees shiver. Somewhere down the street, a cat cried a mournful sound. Poor kitty probably wanted to go inside. I didn't want to be outside, either. But I knew what I had to do. I had a plan.

I crossed the room in the dark, got down on my knees in the closet, and grabbed the evil camera. My hands were trembling, and my knees felt weak as I sneaked down the stairs. A few seconds later, I silently closed the kitchen door behind me. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark. The cool, damp air felt good on my face.

The neighbors' houses were all dark. Down the street, the cat continued its sad cry. Again, I searched the sky for the moon. But it was hidden behind a heavy blanket of clouds. I crossed my garden and followed the narrow dirt alley behind the houses. The ground was soft and muddy from the rain. My shoes splashed into shallow mud puddles below.

I pressed the camera against my chest and kept walking. A few minutes later, I stopped in front of Alley Pond. That's what everyone calls it. It doesn't really have a name. It's a small, round pond at the end of the alley. Some kids say it used to be a fish pond. Not anymore. It's a big, round hole filled with muddy water.

I raised the camera and prepared to toss it into the pond. But I stopped when I heard a scraping sound from behind a thorny hedge at the side of the alley. I spun around quickly. Did I hear breathing from behind the hedge? Or just the wind? A chill tightened the back of my neck. Again, I had the feeling that someone was there. Someone was watching me.

"Hello?" I called out in a whisper. "Who's there?"

No answer.

Another chill shook my body. I could feel all my muscles tighten. Was someone watching me? I was really afraid now. But I had to finish my mission. I raised my arm again - and heaved the old camera into the pond. It made a big, thudding splash. Then it sank below the muddy surface instantly. I stared at the pond for a few seconds. It didn't float back up. I glanced one more time at the low hedge. No one was there.

Silence.

Was it my imagination?

Ten Minutes Later

I ran back to the house, splashing up mud with my trainers. I silently let myself into the kitchen before creeping back upstairs. But I stopped halfway down the hall when I saw a yellow light seeping from my half-closed bedroom door.

There was someone in my room! My heart thudded in my chest. I tiptoed to the door. Slowly and carefully, I tilted my head forward to peek into my room.

"Sammy!" I gasped. Sammy spun around at the sound of my voice. He was in his pajamas. On his knees in front of my dresser. He had the bottom dresser drawer pulled out. I stepped into the room. " What are you doing in here?"

"I heard you go out. I wanted to look at your camera." He answered. I slammed the dresser drawer shut. Then I pulled him to his feet.

"You little sneak." I muttered. I gave him a gentle but firm push to the door.

"I just wanted to try it." He whined.

"Forget about that camera. It's gone, Sammy. It's gone forever." I said. I gave him another push. He tried to kick me. But his bare foot caught on the edge of the carpet.

"If you didn't want it, why didn't you give it to me?"

"It was broken. I had to throw it away."

He started to argue. But I closed the bedroom door in his face. I yawned. I suddenly felt totally exhausted. All my muscles ached. My head felt like a heavy rock. It still took a long time to fall asleep. And when I finally did, I had a disturbing dream.

I dreamed I was on the high diving board at the new swimming pool. Everyone in school was jammed into the pool, staring up at me. I was ready to take the big yearbook photo. I raised the evil camera in

both hands. It didn't feel like a camera. It felt soft and warm. As I gripped it, I could feel it moving in my hands ... throbbing ... breathing!

The camera was ALIVE!

I held it in front of my face. I tried to look through the viewfinder. The camera began breathing harder. In and out. Something splattered onto my shoes. I glanced down. I saw drops of blood. The camera lens was bleeding. Bright red blood. Drip after drip. But I still kept taking the camera down at the kids below. And I clicked pictures. I aimed the shutter.

I held the film in my hand and watched as the picture developed. It took a long, long time. I gasped when the shot finally came into focus. In the photo, the kids' skin had vanished. Their skulls gleamed in the sunlight. They were all skeletons.

"What have I done? Have I killed everyone in my entire school?" I screamed. I woke up drenched in sweat. I tried to blink the dream away. But the grinning, glowing skeletons stayed in my mind. "Only a dream. Take a deep breath, Julie. It was only a dream."

I shut my eyes and settled back on the pillow. I couldn't stop shivering. I knew I wouldn't fall back to sleep. I just lay there staring up at the ceiling. After a while, the sun started to rise outside my window. It sent a warm, rosy color over the room.

I climbed out of bed and crossed to the window. I watched the sunrise, letting the warmth flow over me. I started to feel better. I got dressed for school. Then I made my way downstairs for breakfast. I was the first one in the kitchen. I started for the fridge to pull out the orange juice.

But I stopped halfway across the floor. And stared! Stared at the evil camera THAT WAS SITTING AT MY PLACE AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE!

Real World

"Wow. At this point, I think the camera has... what was the word? Bonded?" Velvet asked.

"Attached itself, I think, is the word you're looking for. Or something similar." Weiss said.

"Maybe."

"But I'm more curious as to who is following Julie." Blake said.

"You'll see soon enough." Jaune said, slightly shifting when Velvet leaned into him. Taking a risk, Jaune moved his arm to wrap around Velvet. The result was Velvet blushing before snuggling into his side. Everyone else smiled when they saw this. Coughing, Jaune composed himself before finding where he left off. "The camera was dripping wet. Mud covered the lens. I wanted to scream."

Story

I wanted to scream. I wanted to heave the thing against the wall again and again. Jump up and down on it and crush it with a hammer. But I knew it was no use. I'd left it in that house way across town. I'd tossed it into the pond. But here it was. No way. No way to get rid of it. I snatched it off the table. Then I ran upstairs and hid it in my closet before anyone came down to breakfast. I couldn't think of anything else all day.

A few Hours Later

At noon, the Sneer Sisters - Becka and Greta - tripped me and made me spill my lunch tray on the floor. Laughter rang out in the canteen.

"Watch where you're going." Becka said with a sneer.

I didn't pay any attention. I didn't even look at the two of them. I just walked out of the canteen without eating. I kept picturing the camera on the breakfast table. My stomach felt tight as if it were twisted into

a dozen knots. I could barely swallow. How could I eat? I knew I had to get help.

After school, I loaded the camera into my backpack. I rode my bike to the mall. I parked it in a bike rack and trotted to the Camera World store on the second floor. The bell over the door chimed as I stepped in. I saw David's dad standing behind the glass display counter. He wore a blue-and-white striped shirt and khakis. He was polishing a giant camera lens with a soft white cloth.

"Julie? How's it going?" He said, smiling when he recognized me. Mr. Blank is short and thin. He has a narrow, almost bald head with a fringe of black hair at his ears. He has brown eyes, a nice smile, and a black mustache that looks like two tiny straight lines under his nose.

"I want to show you something. Can you tell me anything about this weird old camera?" I said, tugging the camera from my backpack and setting it down on the glass counter. He set the lens down carefully. Then he folded the cloth and tucked it into a drawer.

"Let me see this thing." He said. He picked it up in one hand and twirled it slowly in front of his face. "Weird old camera is right. Where did you get it, Julie? Did you find it on eBay?"

"Garage sale."

"I don't think I've seen one like it before. No brand name. No ID numbers anywhere." He said as he turned it over and studied the bottom. He looked through the viewfinder. Then he studied the lens. "It's self-developing. That's very unusual in a camera this old."

"It's... a very unusual camera."

"I have some books and old catalogues in the office." He said as he stroked his mustache. "Let's look it up."

I followed him into the little office in the back. It was the size of a broom closet. It had a desk with a computer on it, a chair, and stacks and stacks of camera books and magazines. Mr. Blank pulled some fat old books from the bottom of a pile and started thumbing through them.

"No name on the camera makes it a lot harder to find." He said. He cracked open another old book and began sifting through it. "I'm an expert on old cameras. People say I have a photographic memory. Ha - ha."

'That's a bad joke, isn't it?' I wondered.

"I think maybe... I've never seen ... oh, wait!" His eyes darted back and forth as he read the small type. Finally, he gazed up at me while raising the camera and comparing it to the photo. "Julie, I think you've found something very rare. Yes. Yes..."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It says that only one of these cameras was ever built." Mr. Blank answered. "It was actually made for a horror movie that was being filmed in the 1950s."

"A horror movie?" I asked, swallowing hard. He nodded.

"The camera was made for a movie called Say Cheese - and Die Screaming! But the movie was never finished. There were a lot of strange accidents on the set, and they had to close down the production."

"Bad things?" I asked, feeling a chill go down my spine.

"That's all it says. The movie was never finished. And the camera disappeared." He closed the book. He started to hand the camera back to me. "Lucky you. I think you found a piece of movie history."

"No. P-please." I stammered as I backed away. "Can you keep it?"

"Excuse me? This camera is probably valuable, Julie. It- "

"There's something very wrong with it." I said. My voice came out high and shrill. "I don't want it. Please."

"It can be repaired."

"No, it can't! There's a curse on it or something. The camera is EVIL! Please, Mr. Blank - take it. Keep it safe. Keep it away from people." I cried.

"I don't believe in curses or magic." He said, surprised. "That's crazy."

"Please - just take it." I said. I turned to go.

"Maybe I could give you store credit." He said. "You could pick something out in return."

"No thanks!" I said. I couldn't stay there another second. I just wanted to get away from the camera. I bolted out of the office and out the front door. The bell over the door clanged loudly. I ran into the mall and nearly knocked over a woman pushing a pram. "Sorry."

Did I actually get rid of that evil thing? Will it be safe with Mr. Blank? Or will it come back to haunt me again?

The Next Day

After school, I pulled my digital camera from my locker. Then I hurried to the auditorium. Kids were rehearsing a play, Bye Bye Birdie and I planned to photograph it for the yearbook. Everyone was huddled in front of the curtain. Mrs. Harper sat at the piano at the side of the stage. She was banging out a number from the show. She is the new music teacher. She told us all she wanted to shake things up around our school.

Bye Bye Birdie is the biggest musical our middle school has ever tried. I planned to take hundreds of shots from the beginning

rehearsals to opening night. But as I hurried towards the stage, I let out a groan. I'd totally forgotten that Becka and Greta were in the play.

They stood in the middle of the stage, arguing with each other about something. But as soon as they saw me, they both turned and made ugly faces. I made a face back at them. Then I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Shoes thudding on the concrete auditorium floor.

"David! What are you doing here?" I cried after turning around. He had a big grin on his face. He swung his hands behind his back - and I stared at what he was carrying. The evil camera! He raised it to his face, turned to the stage, and aimed it up at Becka and Greta.

"Say cheese!" He called out to them. I froze in horror. He raised his thumb to push the shutter button.

"NOOOOO!" I screamed, raising my hand in front of the lens.

"Why did you do that? What's your problem, Julie?" David asked, lowering the camera. I didn't answer. I stomped towards him and made him back up in the aisle. "What are you doing with that camera?" I asked.

"What's the big deal? My dad let me borrow it. He said you didn't want it anymore."

"But-but-"

"I know you tried to get rid of it."

"Huh?" My breath caught in my throat. "How do you know that?"

"I watched you." He said, shrugging. A strange smile spread over his face. "I followed you, Julie."

"You WHAT?"

"Who do you think was spying on you?" David said, still grinning. "I stayed up day and night. I watched you leave it in that little house. And I watched you toss it in the pond. Who do you think returned it to you both times?"

"How did you get it from the bottom of the pond?"

"I reached in and pulled it out. That pond is only half a meter deep." David laughed. I just stared at him. I couldn't speak.

"You sneaked into my house? You returned it? Did you spy on me? But - why?"

"Just to mess with your mind. I really want to win our contest, Julie. I wanted to get you totally stressed so I could win it easily."

"Well, you got me totally stressed, David. Good work, dude. But I'm still going to win the contest." I said. He started to say something. But Becka interrupted from the stage.

"David-take our picture for the yearbook!" She shouted. Becka and Greta both started waving David to the stage. I stepped in front of David and raised my digital camera.

"I'll do it. I was here first." I said.

"But we don't want you to snap us." Greta said nastily.

"Yeah, Ju-Ju. You don't know how to snap bubble gum!" Becka exclaimed. They both laughed and slapped high fives. Like that was some kind of hilarious joke.

"Go away, Ju - Ju. David has the cool camera."

"Don't use that camera." I said, turning to David. "I'm warning you."

"Warning me?" David laughed.

"I had a good reason to get rid of it. David, listen-" I said, but he raised the camera in both hands and aimed it at the two girls. "No!"

I dived forward and tried to grab it away from him.

Too late!

The camera flashed. The film slid out.

"An instant classic!" David smugly said. He handed the picture up to Becka. She and Greta leaned over it, watching it develop. They had smiles on their faces. But the smiles quickly faded.

"Ohhh, gross! "Becka cried.

"Oh, that's totally SICK!" Greta said. The two girls squinted at the photo.

"What's wrong with your camera, Ju-Ju?" Becka asked. "The color is all messed up."

"Huh? My camera? David was the one who took your photo!" I said, furious.

"Your camera stinks!" Greta said. "Like you, Ju - Ju!"

"Why are you blaming me?" I said. "I didn't-"

But Becka shoved the picture into my face. David and I stared at it. In the snapshot, both girls had green faces and arms. And their skin was all cracked and spotted - like alligator skin!

I gasped. Was that going to happen to Becka and Greta? Were they both going to get green alligator skin in a few minutes? A shudder shook my body. I nearly lost my lunch. David had snapped the picture. But the two girls blamed me. They blamed my camera. Not David!

If the picture came true ... I shuddered again. I knew I had to get help. But who could help me? Mom and Dad would never believe a wild story like this. I grabbed the camera from David. And I ran up the aisle to the exit. I could hear the two girls making jokes about my camera. Then suddenly, the jokes stopped.

I reached the auditorium doors. I started to push one open. And I heard two shrill screams of horror coming from the stage. I didn't have to turn around. I knew what I would see. My knees felt weak. I grabbed the door handle to hold myself up. Another shudder ran down my body. I turned slowly - and saw Becka and Greta screaming and tugging at their faces. Even from the back of the auditorium, I could see their dry green skin. All cracked and lined and lumpy. I swallowed hard. I forced myself to breathe.

"YOU did this to us! You're a WITCH!" Becka shrieked.

"Why do you HATE us SO MUCH?" Greta wailed. Mrs. Harper jumped up from the piano. She stared at me sternly with her hands at her waist. Everyone in the auditorium was staring at me. Becka and Greta screamed and cried, tugging the green skin on their cheeks. "We know what you did to Reena!"

"We'll sue your family!" Becka shouted. "We'll have you arrested! The whole school will know you're a WITCH!"

"I - I-" I could only stammer.

No words would come out. My panic quickly turned to anger. This camera was ruining my life! I swung it high- and smashed it against the back wall. Smashed it hard. I then smashed it again and again. Gasping for air, my arms aching, I raised the camera to examine it. It wasn't hurt at all. Not even a tiny dent. I opened my mouth in a scream of rage. I pushed the door open and ran from the auditorium. I was halfway to the front exit when my mobile phone rang. I fumbled in my bag and pulled it out.

"Mom ! "

"Hi, Julie. I just wondered if-"

"Mom, I'm so glad you called!" I said in a trembling voice. "You've got to listen to me. I - I don't know what to do."

I leaned against the wall and pressed the phone to my ear. I told her the whole story. I started with Reena. Then I told her about Karla and her arm. I told her everything. Mom listened without making a sound. I ended by telling her what had just happened to Becka and Greta and how they blamed me and called me a witch.

"Wow." Mom muttered in a low voice. "Wow."

"What can I do, Mom?" I cried. "You've got to help me!"

"Julie." Mom said. "I know exactly what you need to do."

Real World

"You said David got better, right?" Blake asked, suppressing a snarl.

"Yeah. But it took quite a while for that to happen." Grady answered.

"I can imagine. 'Cause if I were in that spot, David and the two others wouldn't have teeth." Yang growled.

"And technically, in jail. What David did can be considered as stalking in some places." Weiss added.

"Where is he, anyway?" Ruby asked, curious.

"In... a... amusement park." Jaune nervously lied.

"An amusement park?" Coco asked, confused.

"Yeah. Well, he lives nearby one. He sometimes works there when he's not working as a graphic designer." Roman quickly answered before silently motioning to Neo that he would explain later.

"Why a graphic designer? Did he give up wanting to be a photographer?" Ren asked.

"Yes. After the evil camera incident, he became traumatized and decided to take up a 'less dangerous' hobby." Lucy answered.

"What about Greta and Becka?" Velvet asked.

"They are at a boarding school. Let's just say their attitude stuck with them into their teen years." Roman answered.

"Anyway. We're almost done." Jaune said. "You DO?! TELL ME! Julie said, feeling some hope rise in her."

Story

"Type it up, print it out, and give it to your creative writing teacher. It's an excellent story. Very clever. Really." Mom said. My mouth dropped open.

"No, Mom. You got it wrong. Listen to me-" I began, but she cut me off.

"I like the supernatural part. Of course, your dad likes that sci-fi stuff more than me. But I've always said you have a great imagination. I think you take after your aunt Jenny. She-"

"It's... not ... a ... story." I said slowly. I gritted my teeth. I tried not to explode into a million pieces.

"What did you say? My phone is beeping. I'm getting another call. I'm still at work. Dinner may be a little late. Bye, dear." Mom said before hanging up.

Sighing, I tried to control my anger. I heard voices. Three cheerleaders in their red-and-gold uniforms came skipping past me. They practiced a cheer as they moved down the hall. They seemed so happy. I slumped against the wall and watched them till they turned into the next hallway.

I'd never felt more frightened. I'd lost my best friend. I'd injured poor Karla, who was still in the hospital. And Becka and Greta were going to turn the whole school against me. Everyone would soon believe I was a witch. A sob escaped my throat. I bit my lip. I didn't want to cry. I shoved open the doors and ran outside into a cool, grey afternoon. A few raindrops were in the wind. I didn't care about the weather. I didn't care about anything but getting rid of the evil camera. I ran all the way home. I didn't stop at corners. I didn't look for oncoming cars. Houses, gardens, and streets passed me in a grey blur like an out-of-focus photo. I pulled open the front door and heard a cry.

"Julie!" Sammy ran up to greet me. His face was pale. His eyes were big and frightened. "Help me! There's a bee in the house! It's going to sting me!"

Sammy was stung on the nose when he was three. He's been terrified of bees ever since. He grabbed my hands and squeezed them.

"Kill it! Kill it!"

"Sammy, are you home all by yourself?" I asked.

"Mrs. Kellins was here. But she had to run back to her house for a few minutes." I heard a loud buzz. Sammy wasn't making it up. A fat yellow bumblebee swooped low over his head. "Kill it! Kill it!"

I swung my hand and tried to slap it away. The camera slipped out of my hand and hit the floor. The bee soared high, then shot back, making a straight line for my face. I swatted at it with both hands. It made an angry buzzing sound - and retreated to the window curtains. I turned and saw Sammy pick up the camera.

"Nooooo! Drop it! I mean it! Drop it!" I said. But then I saw the bee bounce off the front window. Then it came darting towards my little brother. I swiped the camera out of Sammy's hands. And it FLASHED. Sammy grabbed the film as it slid out of the camera. He raised it close to his face to watch it develop. I tried to grab it, but he

swung it out of my reach. I had a sick feeling about this. "Give me that!"

What have I done to my little brother? The bee flew out the front window. That didn't make me feel any better.

"Awesome shot! Totally awesome shot of the bee!" Sammy laughed. He handed the photo to me. My hand shook as I raised it to my face. It was a close-up of the bee. Sammy's face was completely hidden behind it.

"Weird." I muttered. The bee looked gigantic, like something out of a horror movie. And it appeared to be perched on Sammy's shoulders - in place of his head!

"Hey!" I cried out as another bright FLASH made me blink. But I instantly realized what just happened.

Oh, no ...

As the explosion of color faded, I saw Sammy holding the camera. Another square of film came sliding out.

"Did - did you just take my picture?" I stammered.

"It was my turn!" Sammy said, giggling.

"You idiot! You idiot!" I cried as he laughed and danced around me.

"What's your problem, Julie? Let's see how it came out." He pressed next to me as we watched the picture develop. "Totally awesome!"

At first, I thought I was holding it upside down. But I wasn't. The photo showed me falling head first. Where was I? I squinted hard at the picture. The background was a total blur. But I could see my face so clearly - screaming my head off as I fell. Panic swept over me.

"No! No! No!" I shouted. I grabbed the photo - and ripped it to tiny shreds. I tossed the shreds to the floor. I grabbed the camera away

from my brother. And then I opened my mouth in a shriek of horror. "Sammy!"

His face - it was hidden, hidden behind thick, yellow, spiky hair. BEE hair! Two skinny antennae poked up from the top of his furry head. They twitched back and forth. Sammy raised both hands and frantically tore at the wiry hair that covered his face.

"Sammy! Can you talk?" I screamed. "Can you see me? Can you talk?"

"BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!"

Next Day

Mr. Webb called me to congratulate me. He said I'd won the photo contest against David. I would be taking the big yearbook picture from the high diving board. I barely replied. I think I muttered, "Thanks," and hung up. I was too worried about Sammy. Mom and Dad had taken him to the hospital. He'd been there all night having tests. After a couple of hours, Mom finally called.

"What's up?" I cried. "How is Sammy?"

"The doctors are very puzzled." Mom said. Her voice was hoarse. She sounded very tired. "They think maybe Sammy had an allergic reaction to something he ate. But Sammy keeps telling them a crazy story about a camera."

'At least he stopped buzzing!' I thought.

"Guess what?" Mom said. "Those two girls that are being examined in the next room. Some kind of from your class - Becka and Greta? They're skin problems. Just like in that story you told me. Isn't that weird? "

I sank to my knees on the floor. I realized I was pressing the phone so hard to my ear; I was giving myself a headache. I took a long,

deep breath. But it didn't help.

"I'll call you when we learn more." Mom said before hanging up.

Of course, I knew what Sammy's problem was. Becka and Greta , too . It was the evil camera. But who would believe me? Mom still thought it was a story I made up! I crossed my fingers and prayed the doctors would find a way to help Sammy, Becka, and Greta.

The camera was hidden deep in my closet. I'd been awake all night thinking about it. At about three in the morning, I came up with a plan. A desperate plan to destroy the camera. And to reverse all the evil it had done. And to try to save my own life. It was a crazy hope. But it was the only plan I could think up. I glanced at the clock over the mantel. It was time to go to school and shoot the big yearbook photo.

"You're a winner, Julie." I murmured to myself. I rolled my eyes bitterly. "Yeah, for sure. Big winner"

I pictured the photo Sammy had flashed of me. I could see myself falling ... falling head first ... screaming in terror as I fell. I hugged myself to stop shivering. Was that photo about to come true? Would I be falling just like that off the high diving board? Or would my plan save my life?

One Hour Later

It was a bright, sunny day. Not a cloud in the clear blue sky. A soft wind fluttered the flag in front of my school and made the trees whisper. I made my way around to the new pool next to the football field. The building was long and low and white. The sun sparkled like gold in the wide glass doors.

A blast of warm air greeted me as I pulled open a door. Loud voices and laughter echoed off the white tile walls. Teachers were already herding their classes into the empty swimming pool. Kids were laughing and goofing on each other - having fun. I sighed. I knew

today wasn't a fun day for me. I gazed up at the high diving board. A chill ran down my back.

A metal ladder stretched to the blue platform at the top. The rungs were narrow and steep. The platform looked a lot higher than I remembered. I pictured myself falling head-first from the diving board. I'd imagined it a thousand times during the night. But now it seemed a lot more real. I stood there frozen, two cameras strapped around my neck. Kids' voices rang out from the pool.

"Everybody start swimming!"

"Is this a race?"

"Hey, Tanya, did you wear it? Did you wear your string bikini?"

"Don't we need a lifeguard?"

'I don't like this.' I thought. But I let out a cry when someone grabbed my hand. "Mr. Webb! Hi!"

"Everyone is ready for you, Julie." He said. "I just want to say congratulations again on winning the contest. I know you're going to do an excellent job up there."

We both raised our eyes to the high board. If he only knew, he is sending me up there to my doom. Mr. Webb smiled at me and motioned me to the up.

"Break a leg." Mr. Webb said, flashing me a thumbs up.

Oh, wow. Break a leg? I could break every bone in my body! I turned and walked quickly to the ladder. Some kids in my class shouted at me from the pool.

"Julie, are you going to dive?"

"I'll catch you!"

"Take my picture now! In case you don't make it to the top!"

'Ha - ha.' I thought, rolling my eyes.

David stepped out from behind the ladder. He had three cameras strapped around his neck. He stared at me hard. His face was tight with worry.

"Julie, are you sure you want me to do this?" He asked. I nodded.

"I told you last night, David. I just discovered I'm totally terrified of heights."

"But ... you worked so hard to win our contest.".

"No biggie." I said before giving him a little push toward the ladder. "Go. Do it. Take the picture, David. Have fun."

I stepped back and watched. David grabbed the railing and began to climb the ladder.

Real World

"Huh. I wonder what caused the sudden shift in David's attitude." Nora said.

"And when did she call him?" Blake asked. "WHY would she call him after what he did?"

"During the night. And, despite not liking him, Julie only called David to try and warn him." Lucy answered.

"Makes sense."

"Wait. I just realized." Pyrrha said.

"What is it, Pyr?" Jaune asked.

"This takes place a couple of years after Greg, right?"

"Yes."

"And Spidey said his partner made it. And that was not too long before Greg and his friends first found it, right?"

"Yes."

"What are you getting at?" Neo asked, slightly annoyed.

"Mr. Blank said the camera was in a film production in the 1950s. And even if we take off a few years, that would mean the camera is over fifty years old. Wouldn't that mean someone else made the camera and not Spidey's partner?" Pyrrha asked, earning surprised looks from the rest of Team JNPR, Team CFVY, and Team RWBY.

"Yes and no." Jaune began. "Spidey's partner was a lot older than Spidey knew. He used dark magic to keep himself alive for a lot longer. And the camera that Mr. Blank was referring to was a prototype."

"And the film called Say Cheese and Die?" Ren asked.

"Spidey's partner. The whole thing was an excuse and elaborate setup to test the prototype should someone try to use it for evil or personal gain." Cassie answered.

"Oh."

"Anyway. Back to the story." Jaune said. "The kids pointed and shouted at David as he started to climb. His shoes clanged on the metal rungs of the ladder. And each thud rang in Julie's ears."

Story

"Julie, what's going on? Why is David doing this instead of you?" Mr. Webb asked, running up to me and grabbing my shoulder.

"It's a very long story, Mr Webb." I answered.

Mr. Webb wanted to ask me more questions. But I turned to watch David. He was halfway to the top, climbing slowly and steadily. David will be safe up there, I told myself. The evil camera didn't take a picture of him falling. So he won't fall. And by staying down on the ground, I hoped I was breaking the camera's spell.

That was my big plan.

If I didn't go up on the diving board, the photo of me falling could not happen. I was defeating the camera's magic. Soon the kids in the pool grew quiet as David stepped out onto the platform. He leaned against the railing and raised one of his cameras.

"People! Listen to me, people! Raise your eyes to David and smile. Don't move. He's up high enough to get you all in." Mr. Webb shouted. I gazed up at David from the bottom of the ladder. High above me, he steadied himself against the metal rail. Mr. Webb cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted to David. "At the count of three... "

'It's all or nothing. Please work.' I thought, worried.

"Smile, everyone! Smile up at David. This is going to be classic!" Mr. Webb shouted to the kids.

Typical. David is always David. He didn't wait for Mr. Webb to count to three. He stepped out onto the diving board. Then he raised his camera and started clicking away. David dropped to his knees at the edge of the diving board to get closer to the kids. Then he leaned way forward to get the kids in the shallow end into the shot.

I realized I had stopped breathing. He isn't going to fall, I told myself. The picture shows ME falling - not David. I let my breath out slowly. David changed cameras and clicked a dozen more shots. Then the big show-off stood up on the edge of the diving board.

"That's a wrap!" David shouted down to everyone. "Don't clap- just throw money!"

Kids laughed and groaned and shouted stuff back at him. And then - typical David again. He decided to salute the crowd and take a deep bow. I shut my eyes. I couldn't look. Was he falling? Would he fall?

No.

When I opened my eyes, he was starting towards the ladder. He saw me and smiled. He gave me a quick wave. Then he made a quick spin to take one more look at the crowd below. And that's when he lost his balance.

"He's FALLING!" I screamed.

Kids and teachers shrieked in horror. I saw some kids drop to their knees and cover their eyes. The screams were deafening. As he started to fall, David reached out and grabbed the side of the diving board with both hands. Yes! He managed to hold on.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move a muscle. I could only stare up at him, hands pressed against my cheeks, watching him dangle from the side of the board. How long could he hold on?

"Help is on the way!" A teacher with a mobile phone shouted. "Hang on! Help is on the way!"

I realized I had no choice. I stood at the bottom of the ladder. I took a deep breath and grabbed the railings. My legs felt weak and trembly. I ignored them and pulled myself up. Rung after rung, I climbed as fast as I could.

"I'm coming! David - hold on!" I shouted. But I didn't know if he could hear me over the screams of the kids and teachers below. I kept climbing, rung after rung, until I reached the platform. I could see David's fingers gripping the sides of the diving board. I dropped to my hands and knees. "Hold on, David!"

My heart pounded so hard that my chest ached. Crawling, I forced myself out onto the diving board. I leaned over the side and grabbed

David's wrists tightly.

"I've got you! Swing your legs up. I'm holding you. Swing your legs onto the diving board." I said.

David swung his body hard. One foot bumped the board - then dropped back down. I felt a hard jolt but kept a hold of his wrists. He tried again. This time, one leg sprawled over the board. I gave a hard tug. Yes! Now he had one leg safely on the board.

"Almost there, David. Almost..."

One more tug. Yes! I did it. I pulled him onto the edge of the board. One more, and he'd be safe. One more... I gave another pull, yanking him with all my strength. But I pulled so hard that I lost my balance.

"NOOOOOO!" A shrill scream escaped my throat as I felt myself start to fall.

And the thought flew through my mind: the camera has WON! NO!

On his stomach on the diving board, David swung his hands out - and grabbed me before I could fall. My knees banged the board. I fell face down onto it. Pain shot up my body, but I was safe. We both were safe. We held on to each other, panting hard. Then we carefully stood up and started towards the ladder.

"Julie, maybe we should be a team!" David said, grinning at me.

"Yeah. Maybe." I agreed.

I heard the cheers of the kids down below. They were on their feet, staring up at David and me. They screamed and whistled and clapped happily. I lowered myself slowly to the ground. I saw Mr. Webb and several other teachers running toward me.

But I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to know one thing:

Did I defeat the evil camera?

Two Hours Later

I ran home and up to my room. I felt crazy. Dizzy, even. I felt like I was floating a meter off the ground. My whole body tingled. I'd left the photos from the camera spread out on my desk. I lurched across the room and grabbed them. Reena's picture was on top. I raised it close and squinted hard at it. There were no red eyes. The red glow had disappeared from the photo. Karla's picture had changed, too. It showed her jumping off the floor to shoot a lay-up.

"Yes!" I shouted, pumping a fist in the air. "Yes!"

I dropped her photo and gazed at the one with Becka and Greta. Their skin was normal - not green! And in the last photo, my brother, Sammy, had his normal face. No yellow, spiky bee hair covering his face! I did a little dance around my room. I pumped my fists in the air some more. Had I really defeated the camera? I grabbed my mobile phone and dialed Mom at the hospital.

"How is Sammy?" I asked, even though I knew what Mom would say.

"Sammy is fine. All that weird yellow hair suddenly fell out. Becka and Greta are back to normal, too. Your dad and I are bringing Sammy home."

I knew it. I knew it!

The photo showed me falling head-first to my death. But I kept it from coming true. And that broke the camera's magic. And because I broke its magic, every horrible thing the camera did was reversed.

Now I have one more job. Now I had to destroy the camera so no one else would ever find and use it. I thought I knew just how to do it. I cleared all the junk off my dresser and tossed it onto the bed. Then I carefully dug the camera out from its hiding place in my closet.

This was my idea ...

The camera did terrible things to everyone it photographed. So all I had to do was make the camera take a picture of itself. And it would do something terrible to ITSELF!

Simple, right?

I knew it would work. I set the camera down on my dresser top. And I pointed the lens at the mirror. I checked the viewfinder. Perfect. The camera was set to take a perfect picture of itself in the mirror. Now I had to make sure I didn't get in the snapshot. I took a metal coat hanger from my closet. I stretched it out until it was almost a straight line. Then I stood way to the side. I leaned way back. No way my reflection was going to show in the mirror.

Slowly ... carefully ... I stretched the hanger towards the camera. And I lowered the end of the hanger ... lowered it ... until it pushed down on the shutter button.

FLASH!

Yes! The camera snapped a photo of itself in the mirror. But the question remained. Would my plan work? Holding my breath, I grabbed the square of film from the slot. I held it close to my face and stared at it as it developed.

"Come on ... come on ..." And then I gasped. "Huh?"

I stared at the picture. Was I seeing double? I looked down - and screamed.

"Oh, noooooo!"

I stared at TWO evil cameras on my dresser, side by side!

Real World

"In a moment of terror, Julie tore up the photo. But she became confused when the second camera slowly disappeared. And as much as she wanted to get rid of the camera right now, Julie had some more important to do. And that was to repair her relationship with Reena. Rushing out of her room, she failed to realize that the camera had taken a photo again. One that she would never see." Jaune said before closing the book. "The end."

"Wow, that camera is something," Weiss said. "But a good story either way."

"It was." Nora said, with the others agreeing.

"Did Reena and Julie reconcile with each other?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"It took a while, but they did." Cassie answered.

"Where are they now?" Ren asked.

"Reena is in Graduate School, and Julie is in photography school." Lucy answered.

"Well, at least everything ended well for them." Ruby said.

"But do you know what the photo was?" Yang asked.

"Uh..." Jaune began, unsure of what to say, as the photo was of a place that was filled with screams and terrors.

"The house. It was... How did we call it?" Roman said, faking confusion. But a second later, he snapped his fingers. "It was the house where Julie first found the camera. The name is escaping, but that was the photo."

"Huh. I wonder what happened with the place." Coco said.

"Wait. That reminds me." Velvet said. "I thought you guys said you can't escape the camera's powers."

"Yes." Grady answered. "But it's not as simple as that, primarily because it depends on the photo."

"What do you mean?" Pyrrha asked.

"If the photo is just of someone screaming, then the camera aims to do just that. But we're not sure why it reverted the other photos." Cassie answered.

"So what are you going to do with it now?" Coco asked.

"Return it back home and keep it under lock and key until we find a more sure-fire of keeping it contained." Jaune answered.

"Are there any other... things in Vale?" Yang asked.

"To our knowledge, no. There are some monsters living here, but they are harmless." Lucy answered. "And even if one is dangerous, we have ways of getting rid of them."

"That's good." Weiss said.

"Anyway. We should probably head back. It's getting late and-" Jaune began but couldn't finish because a blur flashed past his eyes. And once it stopped, they realized it was Zwei.

"ZWEI!" Ruby cheered. However, before she could pull him into a hug, Zwei's eyes glowed yellow, with his pupils changing to black slits. He then barked a few times, with each one echoing a bit.

"O-O-Okay. That is-" Yang began but couldn't finish when they heard a dog howling in the distance. And the howling seemed to echo throughout all of Vale.

"W-What was that?" Blake asked.

"The reason why you should *ALWAYS* be careful what you wish for. Especially when making those wishes requires something that

belongs to something else that wants it back." Grady answered, suppressing a shiver.

Notes:

The Next chapter will be When the Ghost Dog Howls

These are some ideas I have for future chapters (Not set yet, though.)

For Doctor Oobleck: The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb and Return of the Mummy.

For Professor Peach: Stay Out of the Basement (Because many iterations I see of her has her as a botanist.)

Professor Port: (Not too sure how to put him the story yet.) How to Kill a Monster.

Glynda: (Not sure what book for her yet. These are some ideas.) Attack of the Jack o Lanterns. (So, she would have an idea of what's out there.) or The Ghost Next Door. (This is based on her dislike of saying goodbyes).

Cinder: She gets the honor of meeting Slappy. (And later on, she and the others get to mee the Horrors of Horrorland.)

Penny: Shocker on Shock Street.

Ozpin: Not Sure Yet. (Having him aware of Goosebumps but doesn't fully believe it.)

Chapter 10

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 10: When the Ghost Dog Howls

AAWWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! AWO-AWO-AWOOOOOOO!

"The reason why you should *ALWAYS* be careful what you wish for. Especially when making those wishes requires something that belongs to something else that wants it back." Grady answered as the creature continued howling.

"W-what do you mean?" Ruby nervously asked.

"You ever see those movies where the genie grants three wishes, but they never go how you want?" Roman asked, standing up while keeping his ears strained to see if the howling was coming closer or not. However, it seemed to be coming from all around them.

"Yeah." Yang said, looking around while suppressing a shiver. Even though she could face down most Grimm and not even flinch, whatever was howling back sent chills down her spine. Her survival instincts even kicked in and told her not to go looking for it.

"Think like that, except you can have as many as you want and how you want it. But the catch is that for every wish you make, something terrifying comes ever closer." Cassie added.

"One that you can't escape, fight, or even wish away." Lucy gulped.

"Can you all stop being so cryptic and tell us what creature or monster is howling back?" Weiss asked, slightly annoyed.

AAWWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO!

"I-I think it heard you, Schnee." Coco said, unsure if she should bring out

Gianduja or not.

"Y-yeah."

"What is it, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"We call it the Ghost Dog, and it takes the form of a Blue Kerlew Hound."

"But?" Blake asked, faunus ears twitching violently.

BOOM

"I'll tell you later. Right now, let's head back to Beacon or someplace dry." Jaune answered with a sigh as it started to rain. He then turned to Roman and Neo while picking up the camera. "I know this is going to cost me. But do you think two can return the camera?"

"Sure. And it won't cost you this time, kid, since we also want this camera gone." Roman said while grabbing his camera before adjusting his hat. "See you around, and hopefully under better circumstances."

"Hopefully."

'See you, cutie.' Neo said with a wink to get a rise out of Velvet. However, it failed as Velvet didn't know sign language and was enjoying the hug from her new boyfriend. Silently chuckling, she turned around and left with Roman.

"You know, I don't recall the weatherman saying that it was supposed to rain today." Yatsuhashi said, wishing he brought an umbrella.

"This isn't normal rain." Cassie said.

"Normal rain?" Pyrrha asked, confused.

"What do you mean by that?" Ren asked.

"It is normal rain. But what makes it not normal is what caused it." Cassie said.

"So what's causing it?" Nora asked.

AAWWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO!

"The Ghost Dog caused it to start raining. We don't know a lot about it. But one thing we do know is that it causes bad luck to everyone around it." Lucy said.

"We'll tell you everything we know once we're out of the rain." Jaune said.

"Including the story?" Coco asked.

"Fox is asking if you're also going to tell us the story about it if you have it." Yatsuhashi said.

"If you want." Jaune said before turning to Grady, Cassie, Wolf, and Lucy. "You guys want to come?"

"No. I have to head home." Lucy answered.

"Same." Cassie and Grady said.

"But we also want to check around to see if the Ghost Dog caused anyone else bad luck." Grady added.

"Alright. Just be careful... because you know." Jaune said.

"Right. See you guys." Cassie said.

"Come on, Wolf." Grady said as they left. Wolf turned to Zwei and let out a friendly bark before running after his owner.

"So, do you guys want to head to Beacon or somewhere else dry?" Jaune asked.

"Doesn't matter." Velvet answered, cuddling him.

"We know you're happy that you finally got together with Jaune, Velvet. But still, it would be best for everyone if we got out of the rain, including you and your boyfriend." Coco said.

"R-right."

"We should probably head to Beacon since, as you said, Jaune, it is late." Pyrrha said. But no sooner than she said this, their scrolls went off, alerting them to a message.

"Talk about timing." Yang said.

"Yeah. Do you the... Ghost Dog caused the bullheads to go down?" Blake asked.

"Most likely." Jaune answered with a sigh.

"So... what now?" Ren asked.

"Do you know of any other places where we can go, Jaune?" Weiss asked.

"One that is preferably not already haunted." Yang added.

"I know of one place. It's not the best, but it would put some distance between us and the Ghost Dog." Jaune answered. "Follow me."

Bark Zwei barked before happily trotting alongside Ruby.

Ninety Minutes Later

"Well, this is a cozy little cottage home." Weiss said, looking over the house as Jaune fumbled with the spare key to get the door unlocked and open it.

"It is. My family used to come here when I was younger. I even made my first friend and... discovery here." Jaune said.

"That's nice, Jaune." Velvet said, wondering if she could share a bed with Jaune tonight if they had to sleep here.

"But the name of the place is kind of weird." Yang said.

"Yeah." Blake said, ears still twitching as, despite moving, the sound of the Ghost Dog howling still seemed to have moved with them.

"Who would name the street Shocker Street?" Yatsuhashi asked, looking at the street sign.

"Uh. They probably ran out of names and chose two words at random." Jaune quickly said before finally opening the door. "Alright. Let's head inside and dry off."

"Wow. This place looks real cozy." Nora said, looking around and seeing so many couches and chairs. There was even a fireplace.

"Definitely gives off a summer home." Ruby said.

"Where's the bathroom, Jaune?" Coco asked.

"Upstairs, down the hall, and last door on the right."

"Thanks. Be back in a bit."

"So, what now?" Ren asked.

AAWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! AWO-AWO-AWOOOOOOO!

"Fox says he thinks it would be best if Jaune tells us about the Ghost Dog." Yatsuhashi nervously said, internally debating if he should bring out Fulcrum or not since he doubted he could hit a *GHOST DOG.*

AAWWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! Zwei howled back.

"Yeah." The others agreed.

"Alright. Let me just make everyone some hot chocolate, coffee, or something warm; then we can get started." Jaune said.

"Want me to help?" Pyrrha asked.

"Sure." Jaune said before turning to Velvet. "Velv?"

"Yes, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"Can you get some blankets for all of us? They are in the first room on the left upstairs."

"Alright." Velvet said before they left with the others gathering in the living room while Ren set up the fireplace.

Twenty Minutes Later

"This is some good coffee, blondie." Coco said as they all sipped their drinks.

"T-thanks." Jaune stuttered with a heavy blush on his face. After a bit of deciding, the three teams agreed to sit together on their own couch. However, despite agreeing to that, Velvet chose to sit next to Jaune, cuddling into his side under the blanket.

"Well, while this is nice, we aren't on vacation." Weiss said.

"Weiss is right." Yang said while putting down her drink.

"What *can* you tell us about the Ghost Dog, Jaune?" Ren asked.

"Not much since there's barely any records about it in general." Jaune half-lief. While there were some records, they involved some places and creatures that should remain anonymous.

"So... What can you tell us?" Blake asked.

"Well, as you all already know, the Ghost Dog causes bad luck to everything around it. Also, it's a ghost, so harming it physically is out of the question. However, its biggest power is its ability to make wishes."

"How can it do that?" Pyrrha asked.

"And are there any restrictions to the wishes?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Its teeth or one tooth. I'm not entirely sure. But it uses them to make the wishes. However, here's the thing. It can grant you any wish, but the Ghost Dog is unaffected by the wishes granted by the tooth. You can't wish it away or out of existence."

"So we can't use it against it. Great." Yang said.

"I'm not sure how to ask this. But does the dog have like an objective or mission or something?" Ruby asked.

"In a sense. Again, we don't have much about the Ghost Dog. Most of what we know comes from the only two survivors who..." Jaune began before trailing off as he remembered that the Ghost Dog was connected to the place he wanted to exclude as much as possible. "... ever walked away mostly okay. But to answer your question, the Ghost Dog is after the tooth that it lost. We don't know why or how, but it keeps losing it and just wants it back. And I should also mention this, but the Ghost Dog somehow always knows where it is."

"Do you know how many have encountered the Ghost Dog?" Ren asked.

"No. From what we have discovered, the earliest document report of someone encountering the Ghost Dog was a sorcerer of a small village who was tasked with getting rid of it. But he only barely managed to succeed after using magic to make some of the Ghost Dog's teeth fall out. However, he later died when the Ghost Dog

returned for the tooth. After that and up until now, we believe there have been only four others who have encountered the Ghost Dog."

"Who was the most recent one?" Nora asked.

"And were they the ones that came out mostly okay?" Velvet asked.

"The most recent one was a kid named Andy. There was also his cousin, Marnie Myers. But we generally lump them together since they experienced it at the same time." Jaune answered before remembering Andy's grueling fate at the hands of Jonathan Chiller. "But only Andy came out relatively okay. He was left scarred for a while but was eventually able to overcome it."

"Do you have any of their stories?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Yes, but only about Andy's and Marnie's encounter with the Ghost Dog."

"Can you tell us the story? It might not be much, but anything you can tell us about the Ghost Dog would help us." Weiss said.

"Alright." Jaune said as he set the book on the table before flipping to the correct page. However, before he could read, Zwei suddenly appeared again, standing on the pages.

"Zwei. Get off Jaune's book. Come here and sit next to me under the blanket." Ruby said, extending her hands. Zwei barked with his eyes returning to normal before jumping into Ruby's awaiting arms. She pulled him into a hug before wrapping the blanket around them. Zwei then poked his head out of the blanket before licking Ruby's cheek, causing her to chuckle. While everyone was still on edge about Zwei's barking and glowing eyes, they calmed down when they realized Zwei was still the same friendly dog they knew.

"Alright. Here's the page. Let's begin. Oh, and this story will be from Andy's perspective." Jaune said as he adjusted himself. "There have been many relics throughout the Remnant's history. Some have

greatly benefited mankind, while others threatened to wipe humanity and Faunus off the map. However, there are some relics that both sides would agree on never to use. The reason: They have powers you may not want to unleash. We begin with Andy and his cousin Marnie at a theme park, eating popcorn. After taking a few bites from her popcorn, Marnie looks toward Andy and almost demands to trade popcorn bags with her."

Story

"Andy, trade popcorn bags with me," Marnie said as she tried to grab my popcorn bag. I reflexively moved it away but ended up spilling it all over my lap.

"Marnie, give me a break." I said, groaning. "Why do you want mine?"

"Yours looks like it tastes better."

"Huh?" I asked, confused, while squinting at my popcorn. "They're exactly the same."

"Then you don't mind trading-right?" Marnie laughed.

Honestly, my cousin, Marnie Myers, might be the grabbiest person in the world. And she always wants everything that's mine. But at least she has a sense of humor. She's twelve, the same age as me. Yet she laughs like a little kid. She looks younger than me, too. In fact, despite being cousins, we hardly looked alike. Marnie's short, thin, has a narrow face, straight brown hair that reaches her shoulders, and big green eyes.

Dad, for some reason, says I could be a middle linebacker. I guess that's his polite way of saying I'm big and maybe a little chubby. I have a round face with short black hair and brown eyes. Yet what confuses me the most was how he and many others would say I always had a worried look, even though nothing was wrong.

Yet, despite our differences, Marnie and I get along really well, except when she's grabbing my popcorn or taking handfuls of French fries off my plate at lunch.

"Well? Aren't you going to give me yours?" I asked, handing her my popcorn bag before reaching for hers. But she smacked my hand away.

"I have to taste them both first." Marnie said.

We were in a horror-themed amusement park, sitting in the Haunted Theater, waiting for the show to start. The theater looked like a creepy, old haunted house in a horror movie. The auditorium was dark, except for flickering candles on the walls. Thick cobwebs hung down from the balcony while creepy organ music played. A skeleton usher stood in the aisle, holding a flashlight. Suddenly, jagged lightning bolts flashed on the black curtain across the stage. And thunder boomed over the auditorium.

"This is too scary! I don't like it." A kid behind us cried. His parents stood up, pulled him to the aisle, and led him out.

Marnie and I laughed. We'd been having good, scary fun all week in HorrorLand, especially since our parents let us go off on our own most of the time. Some of the rides were terrifying. And we both screamed our heads off in Werewolf Village. The half-human, half-wolf creatures looked so real! We actually wondered if they were men wearing hairy costumes. The way they growled and snapped their pointed teeth, you'd swear you were staring at the real thing! And another of our favorite places was The

Game Preserve as there were miles and miles of video games. Of course, we had to play until Marnie beat me at every game.

And now here we were, in the third row of the Haunted Theater, waiting for the show to start. A sign over the stage in dripping green letters read: GHOST TOWN CLOWN SHOW. Storm sounds poured

out of the loudspeakers. Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. And I gasped as someone grabbed my shoulder and squeezed it hard.

"Hey!" I said, staring up at the face of a grinning clown standing in the aisle.

The clown leaned over me and squeezed my shoulder again. The clown's face was caked in white makeup. His painted grin was crooked and smeared; he had a red bulb for a nose and a red-and-blue ruffled collar around his neck. And as he leaned over me, I saw a hatchet buried deep in the top of his bald head. The blade was halfway in his skull. The handle poked up at an angle. Painted blood trickled down both sides of his face.

"Hiya, kid." The clown growled in a hoarse voice. Let me introduce myself to ya. I'm Murder the Clown."

My mouth hung open. I wanted to say something, but I was too startled. He brought his face close to mine, and I could tell that his breath smelled like onions. His eyes were bloodshot, and there were cracks all over his white makeup.

"Hey, kid! Know why they call me Murder the Clown?" He growled.

"Because you have a hatchet in your head?" I answered.

"I HAVE A WHAT?!" The clown said, eyes bulging out. But he laughed, which caused me to laugh. However, I stopped when he grabbed me by the arm and jerked me to my feet before guiding me to the stage. "Come on, kid. Enough of this. You're outta here."

"Huh? What did I do?" I asked, trying but failing to break free. "Hey, let go! Where are you taking me?"

Thunder crashed, shaking the auditorium. In the flicker of a lightning flash, I saw faces in the audience staring at the big clown and me. Behind me, Marnie jumped to her feet and made her way toward us.

"Come on, kiddo." Murder growled before pushing me up the aisle. "You've been volunteered."

"I've been what?" I asked, shocked.

"You've been volunteered to be in the show. Fun time. You'll love it. Maybe you'll win a prize. What size clown costume do you wear? Are you a medium or a large? You're pretty big. I think I have an extra large back there."

"Wait a minute! Why does Andy get to be in it? I want to be in it, too." Marnie shouted, grabbing Murder by his collar.

"I like you. I think I have a big nose that will fit you." Murder rasped, turning his watery eyes to Marnie. He then gave us both a push. "Come on. We don't want to make the zombie clowns late for their meals. Know what they're having for lunch today?"

"No. What?" I asked, nervous about the answer.

"YOU!"

I didn't want to do this. No way. I'm kind of shy. Marnie was a lot more excited about going onstage than I was. But a few minutes later, there we were in our red-and-white polka-dot clown costumes. I had a big pillow tucked in my front to make me look fat and a stiff yellow wig that stood straight up in the air like a broom.

Marnie wore enormous platform boots that made her about eight feet tall. She had an ugly red smile smeared over her white face. Along with her polka-dot costume, she wore a pointy red-striped hat tilted on her head like a dunce cap.

"Break a leg!" Murder whispered.

He raised his big, gloved hands and shoved us out onto the stage. The show had already started. The lights were dim. Creepy music played. A ghostly fog billowed all over the stage. Scary-looking

clowns in drab black-and-gray costumes were doing handstands and somersaults in the mist. Marnie and I were the only ones wearing bright colors.

As I stumbled onstage, I saw a clown with a skull instead of a face. His ugly clown smile was painted in bright red lipstick on the skull. Beside

him, I saw a sad-looking clown dressed in rags. He kept moaning and pulling out hunks of his curly hair.

The audience cheered as the clowns started to juggle. What were they throwing back and forth? It was hard to see in the fog. Were those shrunken heads they were tossing? The clown with the skeleton face pulled Marnie and me into the circle of ghost clowns before someone else threw me a shrunken head.

"That's my Uncle Herman!" Someone shouted. "Toss him back!"

The head felt soft and warm. I tossed it back to the clown. Soon, Marnie and I were tossing the heads around with the other clowns, faster and faster, till the audience cheered.

"You're doing great, kids." Murder the Clown called from the side of the stage. But then I saw something that made me gasp. And that moment is where the fun ended, and the terror began.

In front of the stage, a fat clown was waving his hands at the audience. Suddenly, his hands vanished, and he waved with bony stubs. The hands returned a second later, but that quickly changed to just the fingers floating at the end of his arms.

As I stared, the hands kept appearing and disappearing. Was the fog playing tricks on my eyes? I turned to see what Marnie was doing and saw a bald clown with sad black eyes lift his head off his neck. He tossed it across the stage to another clown.

"Hey!" I let out a cry. I gaped at the clown's stub of a neck poking up from his ruffled collar. The second clown tossed the head in the air, and it floated above the stage. It bobbed high above us and didn't come down.

My heart started to pound.

Is this really happening?

"Relax, Andy." Marnie said, placing her hand on my shoulder. "It's all just part of the show."

"But- but clown." I said, pointing to the headless clown. The lights came on in the theater. I turned and squinted at the audience. "Oh, wow. Marnie, look!"

I grabbed my cousin by the shoulders and pointed. When we were sitting out there, the theater had been filled with normal people. Kids and families. But now, some of the people in the audience looked like creatures from a horror movie! I saw rotting faces with missing eyeballs. Heads with patches of hair torn away and bare skulls poking out at the top... Missing arms... Open, toothless mouths with thick gobs of drool pouring over decayed chins...Shirts torn open and bloody guts dangling down.

"They look like GHOULS!" I said, scared. "Ghouls and zombies!"

As I stared, the ugly creatures pulled themselves to their feet and began to push their way into the aisles. People screamed. Kids were crying. Some of the people that still seemed to be human grabbed their belongings and hurried to leave. Frightened groans and moans filled the auditorium. The ugly creatures staggered toward the stage, eyes shut, arms stretched out in front of them.

Marnie and I froze, watching in terror as the ghouls lumbered toward us. I stared into the dark, empty eye sockets of a grinning skull belonging to a ghoulish woman covered in spiders. She tore out clumps of her hair as she staggered toward us.

"NOOOO!" I screamed. But I felt a chill go down my spine and sweat form on my forehead when I realized we were alone. "Marnie the clowns! They all disappeared!"

Marnie and I were alone up there. Bony green hands grabbed the edge of the stage. And then one of the creatures swung himself up. Groaning, moaning, they were all hoisting themselves onto the stage. Holding on to my cousin, I took a trembling step back. But as soon as we did, we heard the frightened voice of Murder the Clown.

"Malfunction! Malfunction!" He screamed. "Something is WRONG! Can't anyone SHUT THEM DOWN? The zombies are out of control!"

His terrified cry sent a chill down my body. I could tell it wasn't an act. The clown was really afraid! More ghoulish creatures climbed onto the stage. Their heavy shoes scraped the floor. They moaned as if they were in pain. As they staggered forward, their eyes were locked on Marnie and me. Their hands were outstretched, reaching for us.

"Marnie! The stage door!" I frantically screamed while pointing at the wooden door in the corner.

We took another step back while I gazed around the room. After a moment, we took off toward the back wall. Reaching the door, I grabbed the handle and attempted to open it. But to our horror, it was locked.

"It-it's LOCKED!" I cried.

I gripped the knob with both hands and shook the door with all my strength. But it wouldn't budge. The hideous, decaying creatures staggered closer. The air suddenly smelled like rotting meat. Glancing down, I saw a trail of yellow slime on the floor. Marnie pounded both fists on the stage door.

"Open up!" Marnie shrieked. "Open up! Can't anybody HELP us?"

"Feed! Feed!" A green-skinned ghoul with eyeballs rolling inside his skull groaned while rubbing his stomach. He raised two fingers to his mouth and loudly slurped, pretending to eat. As they formed a ragged line in front of us, the others took up the terrifying cry.

"Feed! Feed! Feed!"

Marnie and I had our backs pressed against the brick wall at the rear of the stage. As the disgusting creatures chanted and rubbed their bellies, we began to edge to one side.

"Feed... Feed!"

Slowly, we tried to slip away from them, sliding our feet silently over the floor, our backs pressed against the wall.

"HEY!" I shouted as I tripped over something and stumbled to my knees.

Looking to see what it was, I noticed that I had tripped over a big spotlight with the light on. An idea quickly formed in my mind. Grabbing the spotlight, I aimed the light at the ghouls. The ghouls groaned before raising their arms to shield their 'eyes.' They then began to back away. I kept it on them until I could barely make them out anymore. However, once they were gone, I quickly moved the light to aim it at the other ghouls that were getting too close. However, while four were stunned, many more were still stumbling toward us. My whole body trembling, I struggled to hold the big spotlight steady. I swept it over the line of moaning ghouls and zombies.

"Feed... Feed... Feed..."

They tried to shield their eyes. In the circle of bright light, they appeared to shrivel ... shrivel and shrink. Moaning in pain, they staggered back.

"Keep it on them!" Marnie shouted. "It's working! Keep the bright light on them!"

I gripped the sides of the spotlight tightly. Could I keep the ugly creatures away till help arrived?

No.

I gasped as the light flickered and flickered before going out. Darkness fell over the stage. The ghouls uncovered their eyes and pulled themselves up. They shook themselves. I saw an arm fall off and thud to the floor. They began lurching toward Marnie and me again.

"Feed... Feed..."

Struggling to breathe, I shook the spotlight as hard as I could. But it was fruitless. The light was dead. I let go of the spotlight when I felt a hand grip my shoulder. Turning around, I saw that it was Murder the Clown.

"This way." He growled while pulling out a key.

Murder opened the stage door before pushing Marnie and me through it. He then closed the door hard. We heard a squeal followed by a groan of pain. I glanced back and saw two arms caught in the door. The fingers twitched, but the hands didn't stop reaching for us. Yet, despite the door being closed, I could still hear them.

"Feed... Feed... Feed..."

I swallowed. My throat was as dry as cotton. I glanced around and realized that we were in a long, dimly lit hall.

"Quick thinking with that spotlight, kid. You held them back, at least for a while." Murder rasped. His watery eyes flashed as he rubbed his hands together before leaning to the side of my head. "You passed your first test. Now it gets REAL!"

"Huh?" I cried. "What do you mean? There's more?"

"Were those zombies real? Was it all a fake? Or were we really in danger?" Marnie demanded. Murder the Clown tossed back his head and laughed before winking at us.

"Of course, it was all a fake." Murder said. "Everything in HorrorLand is a fake - right?"

'Then why is he sweating like that?' I wondered as he led us down the long hall. And why did he sound so frightened when we heard him pleading for someone to shut off the zombies?

"I was just kidding. You kids are finished. You did a great job. We gave everyone in the audience a thrill."

Was he joking? When the zombies and ghouls headed for the stage, most of the audience ran away! Murder hummed to himself as he led us into a

little dressing room. He helped us clean off the clown makeup before getting us out of the clown costumes.

"This way, kids," Murder said as he showed us a shiny black door before going over to open it. "Glad you enjoyed yourselves."

"Uh. Thanks." I said, unsure of what to say. But I became worried when Murder stopped opening the door. A ragged grin formed on his white-caked face.

"Know why they call me Murder the Clown?" He asked but didn't give us time to answer. "Because I murder the audience! I really murder them!"

'I really hope he is joking.' I thought.

"Don't let it hit you on the way out." Murder said as we went through the door before slamming it shut behind us.

"N-now what?" I stammered. "Where are we?"

Real World

"Wait. So, was that all an act?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Or was it real?" Weiss asked.

"No one knows for sure. We do know there were some humans and faunus there, but other than that, we don't know." Jaune answered.

"But what's with Murder the Clown?" Ren asked.

"And was he being serious or joking when he said he killed the audience?" Velvet asked.

"UUUHHHHH." Jaune began, trying to come up with an answer, as Murder never existed since it was a disguise. "He was an employee of the theme park. We don't know his name, but we do know that he started off very differently before becoming how Andy and Marnie first saw him."

"How did he begin?" Pyrrha asked.

"Murder began as a technician fixing the rides. But he always had a passion for making people laugh. However, he had no idea what his 'identity' while on stage should be. Yet, he took on the name Murder the Clown when someone nearly died from laughter because she couldn't breathe. From then on that was his stage name. We don't know his real name. But to answer Velvet's question, he was only kidding."

"That's good." Velvet said.

"But what was the name of the theme park?" Coco asked.

"And is it still around?" Ruby and Nora excitedly asked.

"We don't know the name of the theme park. And it closed down." Jaune lied. In reality, the place was still around, and he knew the various paths they had to take to get there. However, he didn't want to risk word getting out about it.

"Well, that's too bad. If it really was as scary as how they said it was, then it might have been worth going." Coco said.

'I doubt it.'

"For some anyway." Blake said, not really liking their parks.

BOOM

"Wow. It's really coming down hard out there." Yang said as the rain pelted the window.

"Fox wants to know if there is any way to determine how close the Ghost Dog is." Yatsuhashi said.

"No. Unless you wish for something, there's no way to tell how close it is." Jaune answered. "Anyway. Let's continue. After Murder the Clown closed the door, Andy and Marnie heard a bell ring above their heads. However, they had to blink a few times to adjust to the sudden brightness of the room."

Story

The first thing I saw was a row of glass shelves against a blue wall. The shelves were filled with little dolls. I took a step closer and realized that the dolls had human bodies. Male and female, dressed in dark-striped business suits and frilly dresses in all colors. Still blinking, I took another step closer. The dolls had human bodies, but their heads were strange... They all had wolf heads! Were they werewolf dolls?

"Check this out," Marnie laughed as she lifted a red and yellow package off a shelf. It read MAKE YOUR OWN QUICKSAND on the

front. The box showed a boy and girl up to their necks in yellow-brown sand. "Look. It says you just add water and sand!"

"Kind of funny." I muttered. A slim green lizard with bright red eyes caught my attention. Was it made of rubber? Plastic? A sign read: Go AHEAD. PET THE LIZARD. I reached out two fingers and gently rubbed the toy lizard's back.

"AAAAAAAIIIIIIEEEEEEE!"

I jumped a mile as a deafening scream blared from the lizard's open mouth. But while I calmed my racing heart, Marnie laughed at the sight.

"That really gotcha, Andy! Ha-ha. I want one of those!" Marnie said.

"Is this some kind of joke store?" I asked.

As if something compelled us to do so, we turned around and saw a blue-and-white sign above the cash register counter. In big, drippy letters, it read: CHILLER HOUSE. Under that, it said: GIFTS & SOUVENIRS. ESTABLISHED 1496.

"Yeah. For sure. 1496. Like I believe that." I said, rolling my eyes.

"This store is awesome," Marnie said, picking up a glass candy jar. The label read: SOUR GUMMI GERMS. "Check it out, Andy. I guess they're all shaped like germs!"

"Yum!"

Glancing around, I realized that we were in a relatively small store. But it had shelves from floor to ceiling on every wall and display counters and shelves stacked high in the middle of the room. Things were piled everywhere. There was barely room to walk. All the shelves were jammed with toys, candy, dolls, scarves, masks, T-shirts, and all kinds of junk. Marnie and I were the only customers. I didn't see anyone behind the cash register. I picked up a box with a

giant gorilla on the front. It said: INFLATABLE 800-POUND GORILLA. I set it down next to a massive shark jaw.

"Anyone home?" Marnie called.

Silence.

"Anyone here? Is the store open?" Marnie said, cupping her hands around her mouth.

I heard a rustling sound from somewhere behind us. Then I heard footsteps. A man stepped out from behind a stack of boxes. I blinked a few times as I took in his appearance. He was big, balding, and resembled some historical figures I saw in my history books. Or maybe the old guy on the Quaker Oats oatmeal box. He looked very old-fashioned.

He had little square eyeglasses perched low on his long, pointed nose. He had pale blue eyes and thick white eyebrows. His thinning gray hair was swept back on his broad pink forehead and was scraggly in the back. He wore a dark suit with a vest under the jacket. A ruffly white shirt and a black bow tie, big and loosely tied, completed the look.

"Hello. Welcome." He said.

He had a croaky and raspy voice. When he smiled, a gold tooth gleamed in his mouth. He rubbed his hands together as if he were cold. I saw a sparkly blue-jeweled ring on his right hand. He stepped out from behind the boxes while studying us over the rims of his square eyeglasses.

"Welcome to Chiller House." The guy said, his gold tooth flashing. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm the owner of this shop, Jonathan Chiller."

"Cool shop." I said, "Is that a real shark jaw?"

"It's hard to say what is real and what isn't real." Chiller said, rubbing his hands. He picked up a pink animal hoof and dangled it by the little chain attached to it before tossing it to Marnie. "Is this a real Lucky Pig's Foot? Or is it a fake? I guess it comes down to what you believe."

"Well, it wasn't lucky for the pig!" Marnie said after examining it. Chiller's smile tightened across his face as he turned to me.

"I see you're interested in the inflatable 800-pound gorilla. I have a good air pump to go with it. It only takes a few days to inflate it."

"I don't think my room is big enough." I said, shaking my head.

"This would make a nice gift for someone." Chiller said, holding up a wriggling brown thing. "It's a two-headed worm. It's alive. I have plenty

of worm food you can buy for it."

"Yuck." Marnie said, disgusted. Something caught my eye on a high shelf. I pulled it down and saw that it was a large animal tooth on a leather cord.

"Is this from a jungle animal?" I asked. Jonathan Chiller raised both hands as if saying stop.

"That's not really for kids." Jonathan said. "You might want to put that back on the shelf."

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"It has powers you may not want to unleash."

"Chicken." Marnie said after seeing me nearly drop the tooth. Thankfully, I managed to catch it by the cord.

"It isn't a joke," Chiller said, taking the tooth from me before polishing it.

The yellowish tooth had to come from a gigantic animal. It was nearly as big as my thumb! It was flat on the top except for a slender dent in

the middle. It came down to two sharp points.

"Is it a tiger's tooth?" I asked, causing Chiller to shake his head.

"I'll tell you the history of this tooth." Chiller said, rubbing the tooth. "This tooth is more than three hundred years old. It comes from a tiny Highland village in Scotland. The people of the village were fishermen and sheep herders. Their village was a cold, bleak place. It was winter there for six months of the year. They were cut off from the rest of the world and very superstitious."

'Then how did they survive?' I wondered.

"One day, an unusual dog wandered into the village. The dog was a Blue Kerlew Hound. I know you've never heard of it. It was a rare breed of Scottish wolfhound. The hound's fur really was a dark shade of blue. The villagers didn't like a stranger in their village, especially a stranger with blue fur. But bad things started to happen. The lake suddenly stopped giving up fish. And the sheep began dying from an unknown disease."

"Did they know what was causing it?" Marnie asked.

"They blamed it on the dog. They claimed the dog was enchanted and had brought the bad luck to their village. They tried to chase the dog away, but it wouldn't leave. They were afraid to kill it because of its evil powers."

"What did they do?" I asked.

"The desperate villagers sent for a sorcerer who lived nearby. They offered him the best house in the village if he could rid them of the dog. The sorcerer tried several spells to make the hound vanish. But

the vanishing spells all failed. Finally, the sorcerer tried a different kind of

spell. He cast a spell to make the hound lose all its teeth. He believed that would take the dog's power away. But the spell wasn't powerful enough. The dog lost only a single tooth. As the sorcerer watched, the dog uttered a howl of surprise. And then it turned and ran away. It wasn't seen again."

"What happened afterward?" Marnie asked.

"People began catching fish once more. The sheep stopped dying. Good luck returned. The sorcerer was a hero in the village. He stayed in the best house, high on a green hill overlooking the lake. The sorcerer kept the tooth as a good luck charm. To his surprise, he discovered that it

could grant wishes. The tooth made him famous. Highlanders came from distant villages to have their wishes granted. Poems were written about

the sorcerer, and songs were sung."

"But I feel like something terrible happened to the sorcerer." I said.

"And you would be correct. His story ended on a stormy, cold night. As the rain poured down, villagers heard horrible howls and cries from up on the hill. A flash of lightning lit up the sorcerer's cottage. Several villagers braved the rain to run up there. They found the tooth in a puddle of rainwater. And they found the sorcerer dead, torn to pieces. The villagers immediately knew it was the dog when they saw its footprints surrounding the sorcerer's house. They knew that the Blue Kerlew Hound had returned for its revenge."

"How did you get the tooth?" I asked as we gazed at the tooth while Chiller dangled it before us.

"I'm a collector." Chiller answered, shrugging.

"The tooth really grants wishes?"

"Yeah. Sure. Like in all the old stories," Marnie said, rolling her eyes. "It grants you three wishes - right? But the first two wishes don't turn out right. So you have to use the third wish to undo the first two wishes."

"No." Chiller said softly, rubbing the tooth as he gazed at us with his pale eyes. "It's not like the old stories. The tooth grants ALL wishes. You just have to be careful of one thing."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"Don't let it get wet. The tooth was lying in a rain puddle. There's a lesson there. Keep it dry. Always keep it dry."

"What happens if it gets wet?"

"You'll get a shock."

"A shock? What kind of shock?"

"You still want to buy it?" Chiller shrugged, not bothering to answer my question.

"I'll buy it!" Marnie said.

"Whoa. Wait. Give me a break, Marnie. I saw it first. I took it off the shelf. I want it." I said, causing Marnie to stick her tongue at me.

"We'll both buy one!" Marnie said, turning to Chiller.

"No. That's impossible. There's only one Blue Kerlew tooth

in the world." Chiller said.

"I called it first. I said I'd buy it first." Marnie insisted.

"But I saw it first. Why are you such a copycat? Why do you always have to have what I have?" I asked, causing Marnie to shut up for a moment.

"Okay, okay. Fine." Marnie snapped. "Take it. Go ahead, Andy. It's a total fake. You know it is. It probably isn't even a dog's tooth. I don't want it."

"Okay, great." I said before turning back to Chiller, who had an amused and slightly off-putting grin on his face. "I'll take it."

Chiller was already wrapping the tooth up in tissue paper. Then he placed it in a little box and wrapped a blue ribbon around it. Once he tied it off, he pulled a furry little figure from a drawer. It was a tiny green-and-purple creature, like the park workers of the theme park. He attached the little creature to the ribbon before gazing at me hard. "Take a little creature home with you."

"How much does it cost?" I asked, reaching for my wallet. However, Chiller waved me away.

"No. No money." He said. "You will pay me back next time you see me."

I stared at him, confused.

What did he mean by that?

Real World

"Wait. So this Jonathan Chiller figure was the one who gave Andy and Marnie the tooth the Ghost Dog is looking for?" Weiss asked.

"Yes." Jaune answered.

"Why would he give something so dangerous to two kids that don't seem to be that mature?" Coco asked.

"We don't know. But if you ever see him or his shop, you're more than welcome to ask him."

"What do you mean by that, Jaune?" Pyrrha asked.

"Simple. Chiller has something that makes it so that you can only find him or his shop if he wants you to find them."

"Do you know anything about him?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Not much. We know that he had a lonely childhood because of his mother; we don't know the reason, though. And somehow, he became an expert in collecting rare but dangerous items. Chiller also likes to play games and loves his toys, but that's all we know about him."

"Do you know of anyone else who received... items from Chiller?" Ren asked.

"We know some, but most likely not all of them. Thankfully, all the ones we do know are safe and are leading mostly normal lives again."

"Do they still have the items Chiller gave them?" Yang asked.

"Only two of them had an item from Chiller's shop. But only one of them had the item Chiller originally gave him; the other grabbed a different item from his shop."

"Did you ever meet Chiller, Jaune?" Ruby asked.

"Thankfully, no." Jaune answered.

"But what about the little... creature keychain that Chiller gave them?" Nora asked.

"Yeah. I feel like he gave them for a different reason other than a gift on the house or a souvenir." Velvet said.

"Fox is saying he thinks it has something to do with Chiller saying that Andy will pay him back another time." Yatsuhashi said.

"I wonder what he meant by that." Blake said.

"Fox is correct. And you'll see toward the end of the story." Jaune said. "Anyway, back to the story. It was a few days later, and Andy was finally home after a long day at school. He placed the little creature on the shelf of his bookcase. However, he has yet to unwrap the tooth Jonathan Chiller gave him."

Story

The following Saturday, Marnie's parents dropped her off at my house for the day. She lives about twenty minutes away, so we're always visiting each other. I didn't mind, though, as Marnie and I always got along great, except when she drove me crazy. And today, she was driving me crazy about the Blue Kerlew tooth. We were up in my room, and I wanted to finish my math assignment, so maybe we could go to the mall or something. But Marnie wouldn't let up about the tooth.

"Where is it, Andy? Why haven't you tried it? Come on. Get it. Let's make a wish." Marnie asked, looking around my room before getting up close and personal.

"It's a joke." I said, pushing her away. "You didn't really believe that crazy old guy's story, did you?"

"How do you know it's crazy unless you try it? Come on. Just one wish. Where is it? Where?" Marnie said, reaching into my shirt pocket. But she started tickling me after I pulled away. She knew I was ticklish. "Come on. Give it up, Andy. Where is it? Where?"

"Stop! Stop it!" I shouted, laughing.

"Just one wish, Andy. Then I'll stop talking about it." Marnie said, moving back.

"Promise?" I asked, gasping for air.

"I swear." Marnie said, raising two fingers in the air.

"Okay, okay."

Grumbling, I pulled the box from the desk drawer where I'd hidden it. I opened it and unwrapped the tissue paper. Marnie made a grab for the tooth, but I swung it out of her reach. I slid the leather cord around my neck. Then I adjusted the big tooth on my chest.

"Let's think. .. . What should we wish for?" Marnie asked, closing her eyes and thinking. I squeezed the tooth in one hand. We stared at each other, thinking hard. Downstairs, I heard my parents' voices. They were talking about dinner.

"I wish we could go out for dinner. Mom's cooking is, like, disgusting." I said without thinking.

"Andy, are you ready? We're going out to the Burger Basket for dinner." My dad shouted from downstairs.

"Yessss!" I pumped my fist in the air as Marnie's mouth dropped open.

"Andy. You made a wish. And it came true!"

"Huh?"

"I wish I could go to the Burger Basket with you!" Marnie shouted, grabbing the tooth from me and squeezing it.

"Marnie. Would you like to come with us?" Dad shouted from downstairs. We were both so stunned that we burst out laughing. "Is everything okay up there?"

"No problem. We're coming." I shouted.

"The tooth - it works!" Marnie said, staring hard at it. "You squeeze it in your fingers and make a wish. And it works instantly!"

"It had to be a total coincidence. Don't make a big deal about it, Marnie." I said, shaking my head as I headed for the door. But she grabbed me and spun me around.

"Let's make a big deal. Let's make a BIG wish. Something crazy."

"Not now. Mom and Dad are waiting for us."

"Let's see... I wish... I wish..."

"I wish Dad got a huge, brand-new red Escalade!" I said, clasping my hand over her mouth.

"Good one. Let's see if it came true." Marnie said, pushing me away. We raced down the stairs. At the bottom, Marnie tripped me, and I nearly fell on my head.

"What's the rush? Are you two starving?" Mom called.

We ignored her and hurtled to the front door. I held my breath. Was the tooth for real? Would there really be a new Escalade in the drive? I pulled open the front door and leaped onto the stoop. My eyes swept up and down the driveway.

No.

No new car.

"I don't BELIEVE it!" Marnie screamed from behind me. She grabbed my head with both hands and turned it to the street. I uttered a cry when I saw a brand-new red Escalade parked at the curb.

"That's - that's impossible!" I stammered. "No WAY!"

"Like it?" Dad asked, coming up from behind with a smile on his face.

"Well ... YEAH!" I blurted out.

"The dealer is so desperate to sell it." Dad said. "He's letting me test drive it for a few days."

Marnie and I stared at each other. We were practically bursting with joy. So far, the tooth has granted three wishes out of three! I tucked the tooth down the front of my T-shirt. Marnie and I climbed into the back of the car. It was a real climb. The car was about a mile off the ground! I took a long, deep breath. I love that new car smell. I rubbed my hands over the smooth leather seat.

"Check it out, Marnie." I pointed to the DVD screen in front of us. "Is that totally awesome?"

"What movie should we wish for?" She whispered.

"Stop!" I said, glancing to the front. Mom and Dad were fastening their seat belts. "Not another word about the tooth."

"Andy, don't you realize how incredible this is? We can have anything we want. Anything!"

"Why do you keep saying we?"

"Did you forget? It's MY tooth."

"I know it. So big deal. Besides, stop saying we. I know you. You'll start making wish after wish, and I won't get a word in."

"What's that about wishes?" Mom asked, turning to us. "What are you two arguing about?"

"Nothing." I said. "We wish we could decide whether to get fries or onion rings."

"Why don't you get both?"

"See?" Marnie whispered, poking me in the ribs. "Another wish came true!"

Half an Hour Later

We sat in a big booth at the Burger Basket. Mom and Dad sat across from Marnie and me. My dad is a clothing store manager, and he's a very calm, very serious person. But tonight, he was totally psyched. All he wanted to talk about was the Escalade.

"I'm not sure we need such a huge thing." Mom said.

"Sure, we do." Dad insisted. "Look how easy it will be to drive the soccer team."

"But I'm not on the soccer team!" I said.

"You might get on the soccer team some time." Dad argued.

'Good one, Dad.'

Of course, Marnie and I were psyched, too. We were totally excited about the tooth. We were both bursting to tell my parents. But we both knew we had to keep it secret. My parents don't have the greatest imaginations. If they thought I was getting crazy ideas about this big tooth I was wearing, they would definitely take it away from me.

The waitress took our order. Marnie and I both got fries and onion rings. Suddenly, my parents jumped up. They saw some friends across the restaurant. They slid out of the booth and hurried over to say hi. As soon as they were gone, Marnie stuck out her hand.

"Quick. Pull out the tooth."

"No way. They'll be back here in a second." I said.

"I'll tickle you. I really will." Marnie said, wiggling her fingers at me. I let out a long sigh before pulling the tooth from under my shirt. Once

she saw it, Marnie immediately grabbed it. "I wish they bring me TWICE as many French fries as you!"

"Nice," I muttered. I took the tooth back and tucked it away. "Do you really think you can use MY tooth whenever you want?"

"Yes. Don't be selfish." We both sat there staring straight ahead. Mom and Dad slid back into the booth.

"You two are certainly quiet tonight." Mom said.

"We're... uh ... thinking about homework." I lied. The waitress brought the food. She set down the plates of French fries. And as we expected, Marnie got twice as many fries as me.

"What's so funny?" Dad asked when Marnie giggled.

"So many fries!" Marnie said, causing me to roll my eyes. Sometimes, my cousin is totally annoying.

One Hour Later

After dinner, we drove Marnie to her house. She opened the back door and jumped down from the Escalade.

"Cool car!" She shouted. Then she leaned back into the car and whispered to me. "Be sure to bring the tooth to school."

"Huh? I don't think so." I said.

"Andy, just think," Marnie whispered. "We're never going to fail another test!"

She slammed the door and hurried up the walk to her house. I sat back on the smooth leather seat and sighed. I suddenly felt very tense. My heart began beating fast. I could feel the big tooth against my chest. Was this thing too good to be true?

Real World

"I can already see how and why Marnie didn't make it." Blake said.

"Yeah. She's playing with fire now." Coco added.

"Yeah. I don't like giving spoilers, but it was her greed that was her downfall. And it wasn't a clean one either." Jaune said.

"You know, if it weren't supernatural or a wishing granting tooth, this would have been a good story about what greed can do to a person and the consequences that could follow." Weiss said, with the others agreeing. Although, they did find it ironic that it came from Weiss, who was technically the wealthiest person among them.

"Oh. Jaune. I just remembered something." Velvet asked.

"What is it?"

"Why did Chiller say not to get the tooth wet?"

"You'll see in a bit."

"How long do the wishes last?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, the truck. Does it disappear after a short while, or is it there forever?"

"That depends on the wish. As with the fries, it didn't last since Marnie ate them. But as for something like the Escalade, it will stay there until the family decides to get rid of it or it gets destroyed."

"Can the tooth alter the minds of others or anything to make a wish come true? Or make it make sense, like having a dealer practically give the car away to Andy's father?" Ren asked.

"Again, it depends on the wish. But yeah, the tooth will alter things to make whatever the wish was seem more realistic." Jaune answered. "Anyway-"

BOOM

ZAP

"And there goes the lights." Yang said, annoyed, as the lights went out, and they sat in the darkness.

"Yeah." Jaune said, rubbing his forehead.

"Do you have a backup generator, Jaune?" Nora asked.

"Yes, we have a gas-powered generator. But we don't have any spare gas or gas in it. And even if we did, I doubt it would work since I think the Ghost Dog caused the lights to go out."

"Then what should we do? The light from the fireplace is enough for this room. But what if we have to leave?" Ruby asked.

"I'm pretty sure we have some candles we could use."

"Do you know where they are?" Pyrrha asked.

"Last time I saw them, they were in the closet in the hallway. And there's a lighter in the drawer next to the stove."

"Alright. I'll be back in a moment."

Five Minutes Later

"Now, this is cozy." Velvet said, snuggling into Jaune's side. Blushing, Jaune moved his arm so he could wrap it around Velvet, causing her to smile.

"It's almost like we're camping." Ruby said, with Zwei barking between her legs.

"All we need now is some smores." Nora said.

"Maybe one day we could go out camping." Jaune said.

"That would be nice." Coco agreed.

"So long as there are no werewolves." Weiss said.

"Don't worry, Weiss. I'm pretty sure we'll be able to tell when one is near." Pyrrha said.

"Pyrrha's right. There are ways to see if a werewolf is near." Jaune said, silently wondering how Pyrrha knew that. "Anyway. Back to the story. It was late. Andy was in his room, worrying about the tooth. He knew it was powerful. As such, he feared what the catch to each wish was. But more importantly, he wondered how he would keep Marnie away since he knew she didn't have any self-control."

Story

I gazed at the tooth on the nightstand next to my bed. Pale moonlight poured in from my open window. It made the tooth glow with an eerie green light. I grabbed the leather cord and held the tooth in front of my face.

'Do I really want to take it to school?'

I pictured Marnie showing it off to all her friends, strutting around, acting like it was her tooth. Then I imagined her friends grabbing for it, tugging it away, eager to make wishes of their own. A riot with kids fighting over the tooth, battling in the halls, wrecking the whole school, and making crazy wish after wish. And who would get blamed? Good old Andy.

'A mistake.' I thought, gazing at the glowing tooth next to me. Bringing it to school could be a horrible mistake. I shut my eyes and tried to go to sleep. But no sooner than I did, I heard a deep growl. My eyes snapped open as I jerked upright in bed. "Huh?"

What WAS that? I listened hard. And through the open window, I heard a long, mournful howl. An animal howl. Was it a dog? A neighborhood dog. I've lived here all my life and never heard a dog

howling this late at night before. The dog howled again, a long, warbling wail, causing a shiver to run down my spine.

Jonathan Chiller flashed into my mind. And once again, I heard his croaky voice telling the story of the Blue Kerlew Hound. The mournful howls on the hill ... The villagers running through the stormy night ... finding the sorcerer torn to pieces. TORN TO PIECES! Outside, I heard another sad animal howl. I slid down under the covers and shut my eyes.

But I saw the big blue hound coming for me. It lumbered forward steadily with its tail raised straight behind it ... with its head high, eyes glowing red as fire. Howling... howling as it came to tear me to pieces, as it came back for its missing tooth. Another howl. Right outside. So close... so close. I pulled the covers over my head and pressed my hands over my ears. But still, I could hear it. Even under the covers, I could hear it howling... howling into the night.

How much sleep did I get? Maybe an hour or two.

The following day, I arrived at school with bloodshot eyes, yawning my head off. My head felt heavy as if it were made of solid rock. Sure enough, guess whose cousin was waiting for me at my locker.

"Did you bring it?" Marnie asked. "Did you?"

"Good morning to you, too," I muttered as I turned the combination on my lock and pulled open the locker door.

"I'm not going to make a wish or anything." Marnie said. "I just want to show it to Judy."

I KNEW IT!

"The bell is going to ring," I said, squatting to pick up books from the bottom of my locker.

"Did you bring it or not?"

"Yes, I brought it. It's under my shirt, but -" I said as I closed my locker. But I then saw some kids watching us. I grabbed Marnie's arm and pulled her around the corner, out of sight.

"What's the big idea?" Marnie asked.

"Sshhh." I said, raising a finger to my lips. "Listen, Marnie, this is serious. I mean, really. I heard a dog howling last night."

"So? You heard a dog. Big whoop."

"The dog howled all night. Right outside my window."

"Andy, why didn't you close the window?"

That's when I lost it.

"Don't you get it?" I asked, grabbing Marnie by her shoulders. "The Blue Kerlew Hound? Remember? They found the sorcerer torn to pieces. The dog came back?"

"You think the ghost dog came back to get you? That's nutty, Andy, and you know it. It was probably some dog down the street who didn't want to be left outdoors." Marnie said, laughing. I let go of her shoulders.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But listen, Marnie. Let's keep the tooth a secret, okay? I mean, for now. Making wishes is cool. But . .. I feel kind of creeped out by the dog howling."

"Well... if you don't want the tooth, you could give it to me. I mean, if you're totally stressed about it, I'd be happy to take it." Marnie said, tugging the leather cord around my neck. But I slapped her hand away.

"You never give up, do you!? Listen, I'm keeping the tooth. I just want to be careful, that's all."

"Okay, okay." Marnie rolled her eyes. "No problem. We'll be careful."

"Good." I said. I let out a long sigh and started to relax.

And that's when Marnie grabbed the cord. She pulled the tooth out from under my shirt and squeezed her hand around it. Her green eyes flashed. A devilish grin spread over her face.

"I wish ... I wish the school would get out early because there's a cow loose in the building!" Marnie shouted.

"NO! Are you CRAZY?" I pried the tooth from her hand and started to jam it back into its hiding place under my shirt.

But sure enough, I heard some kids screaming somewhere down the hall. Then ... running footsteps.

And then: M0000000000000.

A Few Days Later

Sunday afternoon, Mom dropped me off at the Cloverfield Mall. She said I could buy my own sneakers, as long as I didn't buy the ones with lights that flash when you walk. I told her that wasn't a problem since I had no reason to buy those kinds. But today was a big deal. She was actually trusting me to shop on my own. As I exited the car, she tucked a ten-dollar bill into my shirt pocket.

"You didn't have much lunch, Andy. Buy yourself a snack." Mom said before making a face. "Why do you insist on wearing that ugly tooth everywhere?"

"Dunno. It's like a good luck thing." I shrugged before waving goodbye and closing the door. I had no way of knowing that the tooth would not bring me good luck that day.

The mall was really crowded. A high school band was playing in the rotunda. And across from it, a big mob gathered around a totally awesome sports car being auctioned off. I tried to push my way to

the front to get a better look. But I felt a hand on my shoulder followed by a familiar voice.

"Why don't you trade the Escalade for the cool sports car?" Marnie asked.

"Marnie, how did you know I'd be here?" I asked, turning around. Marnie wore a pale blue sweater and a short denim skirt over blue tights. She had a blue headband in her brown hair.

"I'm psychic." She said. "Didn't you know I can read minds?"

"Really? What am I thinking right now?" I demanded.

"You're thinking you want to use the tooth to get me all kinds of cool stuff at the mall today."

I burst out laughing.

"I'm serious." She said while her gaze was still on the tooth. "Let's see what we can wish for."

"Let's not." I said. I turned and started walking toward Shoe Universe. She hurried after me.

"Andy, you're no fun. We haven't had any fun at all with the tooth."

"Stop saying we."

"Okay, okay."

"I don't think it should be used for fun. The tooth is serious. It's kind of scary. It's like .. . having too much power."

"We could just get some little things." She said before inhaling deeply. "Mmmmm. Those cinnamon buns smell so great!"

"My dad says it's a trick. He said they pipe that cinnamon smell out into the mall to get you to stop and buy one of their buns."

"I don't care." Marnie said. "How about wishing for cinnamon buns? One for each of us. That's not too scary, is it?"

"Here," I said, pulling the ten-dollar bill from my pocket. "Mom gave me this for snacks. We can buy two cinnamon buns."

"That's a lot of fun. Not." Marnie said, pouting.

We walked past the Cineplex. Three teenage dudes were arguing with the girl in the glass ticket booth that they were old enough to go into some movie. It must have been R-rated. The girl was at her wit's end as she kept asking them for their ID.

"How about free movie tickets?" Marnie suggested.

"No way. I'm here to buy sneakers." I said, shaking my head.

"Why don't you just wish for the sneakers?"

"I want to pick them out."

"How about just one crazy wish, Andy? You know. Something insane. Like a cow loose in the mall."

"Give me a break, Marnie. You already did that, remember?"

"And it was awesome!" she said, giggling.

"No more cows."

Marnie took off toward her favorite store, Boutique Boutique. The sign in the window said: SO NICE WE NAMED IT TWICE. She nearly collided with two women pushing baby strollers.

"Andy, check it out." Marnie said. I made my way slowly up to the shop window. Marnie had her face to the glass, staring at a pile of sweaters. A little sign read: PURE CASHMERE.

"Don't drool. It's very immature." I said, earning a hard shove in the ribs.

"I just want the blue one and the pale green one. Or maybe the creamy white one. I'm really not into sweaters, but those are amazing. Please, Andy? It's so simple. Just make a wish for me to have two of them in my size. What can it hurt?" Marnie said before turning to me. And up until this point, I had been calm and patient. But it was when she grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me that I lost it. "Please? Pretty please!?"

"You're driving me CRAZY! I wish you'd STOP TALKING about the tooth!"

Marnie made a hard swallowing sound like she was choking. Then she moved her lips... and no sound came out.

"What's wrong? I can't hear you." I asked as her face turned red. And while I wasn't that great at reading lips, I could make out what she was saying.

"I ... can't ... talk. I ... can't ... talk!"

"You're joking - right?"

She shook her head. Her eyes bulged. I could see she was trying to shout. But no sound came out. She really couldn't speak. A chill ran down my back. My mouth dropped open in fright.

What have I DONE?!

Marnie waved her hands frantically. She struggled to speak, to make a sound. A hoarse bleat escaped her throat, and she started to cough.

My mind whirred from thought to thought: Serves her right. She was making me NUTS, wishing for everything she saw.

But then I thought: This is terrible! What if she can never speak again? What if I've ruined her life? She tugged my sleeve with one hand and pointed wildly to her throat with the other. I couldn't read her lips. But I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to wish her voice back.

"Okay," I said. But she grabbed the tooth before I had a chance. She tugged it so hard that the cord dug into my neck. "OUCH! Hey - you CUT me! Is it bleeding?"

Marnie scowled at me. With a deep sigh, she grabbed the tooth and made the wish for her.

"Yes! It's back. My voice... I can talk again." She said before punching my shoulder. "How could you DO that to me?"

"I... I didn't mean to," I stammered. "It was a total accident. But you asked for it, didn't you?"

"I love my voice! It's beautiful!"

"Look what you did to me. Is there a bruise? Is it bleeding?" I asked, pressing my hand against my neck.

"It's a little cut. Just a tiny drip of blood. Sorry. I didn't mean

to cut you. It was an emergency."

"Emergency?" I cried. "It wouldn't be an emergency if you didn't drive me crazy with all your wishes. If - if -"

I stopped. People were staring at us. I recognized two kids from school. They were pointing at us and laughing. I spun away and started to walk.

"Let's go." I said. "Shoe Universe is around the corner. Are

you coming with me?"

"Tell you what." She said, trotting after me. "I'll make you a deal."

"No deal."

"Andy, you're being a total jerk."

"Stop trying to get on my good side."

"One wish. That's all. Come on. One wish - and I'll shut up. I won't even mention the tooth for the rest of the day."

"How about for the rest of the week?"

"Promise."

"If we do one wish, you promise you won't say the word tooth for a week? Raise your hand and swear."

"I swear. But it has to be a good wish."

"Okay. Deal." I said. We were standing outside Shoe Universe. I pulled the leather cord over my head. I held the big tooth in front of me.

"Let me make the wish." Marnie said. She grabbed for the tooth, but it fell out of my hand.

"Get back." I said when I saw that the tooth landed in a sticky puddle. It looked like orange soda. I picked it up and wiped it with my hand. "Here goes."

Marnie's eyes flashed eagerly. She had an excited grin frozen on her face. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for the worst.

"I wish for Shoe Universe to give you and me free pairs of their absolutely most awesome sneakers!"

I waited. I realized I was still holding my breath. I heard a buzzing sound. It sounded like a hive of bees all buzzing at once. It took me

a few seconds to realize the tooth was buzzing. And then it started to vibrate in my hand. Harder ... harder ... until it made my hand ache.

"Huh?" I said, confused.

A blinding light made me shut my eyes. Marnie screamed. A white bolt of electricity roared over me. I didn't even realize I was dancing. Caught in the jolting electricity, my body twisted and jerked. My arms flew over my head. My legs did a wild jig. The loud buzzing no longer surrounded me. It was in my head now. It was like a thousand bees buzzing... bumping against my brain... bumping me as I danced in the painful current. And then, nothing. Just silent darkness.

Real World

"How old are they, Jaune?" Coco asked.

"I believe they were twelve or thirteen when this happened." Jaune answered.

"Well. Young or not, Marnie is starting to get annoying." Weiss said.

"Yeah. I would not have been as patient as Andy was with her." Yang said.

"We can chalk some of it to her being only a pre-teen, but still." Ren said.

"Do you think they would have still been friends if they both survived?" Ruby asked.

"No, not after their encounter with the Ghost Dog. What Marnie did afterward really severed their friendship. Andy would have told her off and never to come close to him again. Not to mention what she's about to do next." Jaune answered.

"I'm honestly surprised Andy and Marnie have been friends up to this point." Blake said.

"According to Andy, Marnie was never bad before they found the tooth. She was just annoying at times. But the tooth brought out the greed in her."

"I can see that. If the tooth didn't show up, then they might have still been friends. But speaking of the tooth, Fox is asking is that why Chiller said not to get the tooth wet?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"We're not sure. Our only leading theory is that it was the work of one of the sorcerer's spells."

"Hopefully, it's just that, and it didn't piss off the Ghost Dog."

"Hopefully."

BARK! BARK! BARK!

"Zwei! Calm down! What's wrong?" Ruby asked when Zwei suddenly started barking.

"What's wrong with your dog, Ruby?" Coco asked.

"I have no idea."

"Perhaps he's hungry." Nora said.

"Maybe. But he also knows how to open his can of dog food and feed himself.

"Perhaps he has to-" Weiss began.

****AAWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO!****

BARK! BARK! BARK! Zwei jumped out of Ruby's lap and dashed to the window to continue barking.

"Okay. That sounds way too close for comfort." Yatsuhashi said.

"Yeah." Everyone else said, suppressing a shiver. And goosebumps formed on their skins while their heart rate significantly increased when a gust of wind nearly blew out all the candles despite them being inside with all the windows closed.

"So, what happened next, Jaune?" Pyrrha asked, eyeing Zwei, who kept barking at the window. They all felt the hairs on their bodies stand up straight when Zwei's barking started echoing.

"The darkness was slowly replaced by a bright light. It was as if someone were lifting a window shade in front of Andy's face." Jaune began. "Andy heard himself groan as his head throbbed. He could feel the blood pulsing at his temples."

Story

I shut my eyes and saw flashing red lights.

"Andy?" A voice called my name from somewhere far in the distance. The red lights faded to gray. "Andy? Are you waking up?"

I blinked, letting in the bright light again. Why did my head hurt so much? Why did my whole body ache? I felt as if I could feel every one of my bones.

"He's opening his eyes." A girl said.

Was it Marnie?

"He's coming around." Another voice, still far away.

Mom?

My body twitched. My mouth opened with a gurgling sound. I tried to sit up. But a shock of pain to my heart made me drop back down.

"Where am I?"

Was that my voice? So hoarse and husky. I blinked a few more times. I saw a red ceiling light. And then green curtains blowing at an open window.

My room?

No. The colors were all wrong. I didn't have a red ceiling light and green curtains. Brown eyes floated over me behind black eyeglasses. Thinning brown hair. A bushy brown mustache.

"Hello?" I asked. "Where am I?"

"Don't you recognize me?" The man said, his face hovering over mine. "I'm your dad."

"My dad? No, you're not."

"Give him some air." A woman said. She pulled the man back from my bed. I groaned again. Marnie sat by the bed, looking very tense and pale.

"Marnie - where am I? Who are these people?"

"They're your parents." She whispered.

"But I've never seen them before!"

"Just be calm. You're safe and sound." The woman said. She smoothed her warm hand over my forehead, brushing my hair up.

"You had a bad shock." Marnie said. "At the mall."

"Did he fry his brain?" The man asked the woman. "Did he fry it?"

"They think you fried your brain."

"No!" I cried. A stab of pain made me cringe. "My brain is okay. But I don't know these people!"

"Andy, are you faking?" A blond-haired little girl asked, poking her face over mine.

"Huh? Faking? Who are you?" I asked, confused.

"Your sister, of course. Don't you remember me? Margaret? But you call me Muggy?"

"Muggy?"

My mouth was suddenly too dry to talk. My heart pounded. I didn't remember her. I didn't remember any of them except for Marnie. Did I fry my brain? Was my memory wrecked? The red ceiling light started to spin. The bed tilted. I grabbed the sheets to keep them from falling out.

"Marnie - help me!" I cried. "Help me remember. I don't know these people."

"Is his brain fried?" The man repeated. "Is it fried?"

"Muggy Muggy Muggy, you're so Uggy Uggy Uggy!" The little girl sang as she pushed her face up to mine. She then poked me in the ribs. "Don't you remember that song? You made it up. You always sing it to make me mad?"

"I-I don't remember." I choked out. "I-I'm so sorry, everyone. I don't remember you. I really don't."

"The tooth was wet." Marnie said. "Jonathan Chiller said you'd get a shock. You didn't dry off the tooth, Andy. And you fried your brain."

"NO -PLEASE!" I cried. "DON'T SAY THAT!"

"He fried it." The man said as he and the woman shook their heads. "He fried it."

"Muggy Muggy Muggy, you're so Uggy Uggy Uggy!" The little girl sang as she pinched my shoulders hard.

"Stop-please!" I moaned. "Stop singing that."

"I'm going to sing it till you remember me! Muggy Muggy Muggy, you're so Uggy Uggy Uggy!"

"Don't you see?" Marnie said. "The tooth was wet. You made a wish when the tooth was wet."

"And you fried your brain." the man said. "I'm your dad. And I'm telling you the truth. You fried it."

"NOOOO! You're not my dad! And you're not my mom! And I don't have a sister! This is crazy!" I screamed before grabbing my head with both my hands. "I-I wish I was ten thousand miles away from all of you!"

RRRRRRRRRRIPPPPPPP!

I heard a loud ripping sound, like someone tugging open a Velcro shoe. And then I felt myself being ripped away, torn from the bed ... from the strange room. Ripped away as if pulled by a powerful vacuum cleaner.

I shut my eyes.

Was that ME screaming?

RRRRRRRRRRIPPPPPPP!

The sound seemed to be following me.

I landed with a jolt on something hard. My eyes shot open.

I blinked, struggling to focus. Where was I? I was buckled into a hard metal seat, staring out a wide window, staring out into the darkness. No. As my eyes adjusted, I saw twinkling stars, millions of twinkling stars.

And then a planet floated into view far above me. A green-and-blue planet. It took me a while to recognize the shape... and then I gasped. I swallowed hard. My breath caught in my throat.

What was REMNANT doing way out there?!

My seat bounced. I glanced down and saw some kind of control panel spread out in front of me. Lights blinked. Numbers flashed on LED screens. Computer monitors showed views of the stars outside. I gazed from the controls to the floating ball that was Remnant, high outside the window. It took me a long while to realize I was in some kind of space capsule.

My heart pounded. I gripped the sides of the chair so hard my hands ached. And I stared into the black depths of space all around me. The blinking stars were tiny bright dots, like pinpricks against the blackness. Am I really ten thousand miles from Remnant?

The question repeated in my mind.

Impossible. Impossible.

But here I was. I wished it... and here I was. All alone, floating in outer space. Chill after chill rolled down my back. Was I afraid? Yes. Of course. I grabbed for the tooth on the cord around my neck. I was ready to wish myself back home. But I stopped myself. I was too dazzled by the incredible view. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. I couldn't take my eyes off our blue-and-green planet. How many people were lucky enough to see Remnant this way?

"Wow. I wish Marnie could see this." I said. I didn't think. I didn't mean to make a wish. The words just burst from my mouth as I gazed out the capsule's window. And...

RRRRRRRRRRIPPPPPP!

That sound again. It was like someone was tearing fabric. The capsule rocked. I was tossed forward, then back. Marnie popped into

the seat beside me. She bounced once, then settled on the metal chair.

"NO000!" Marnie screamed. Her eyes bulged at the view out the window. And then she saw me beside her. "Andy? Where ARE we?"

"Outer space," I said. I pointed toward Remnant floating above us.

"NO!" Marnie cried again. "You wished...?"

"I wished for you to see this, too. Isn't it amazing?"

"No! It's not! I don't like it, Andy. I don't want to be in outer space! Why did you do this to me? Why?"

"I told you -"

"Get us back!" Marnie screamed. "I don't want to be here. You KNOW I'm afraid of flying!"

"Huh? Flying?"

"I am terrified. Do you understand?" Her whole body trembled.

"Marnie, don't freak." I said, trying to calm her down. "Take a deep breath. Look how awesome it is!"

"I don't want to look! Get us home, Andy! Get us home! Get us home!" Marnie screamed, covering her eyes. She then began pounding the control panel with both fists. "Get us home! Get us home!"

"Okay!" But before I could make a wish, she turned and grabbed the cord around my neck. She swung her hand up and pulled the tooth over my head. "Give it back!"

I cried. I made a grab for it... and it floated out of Marnie's grasp.

"It - it's weightless!"

I made another grab.

Missed!

The tooth floated higher toward the ceiling of the capsule. Marnie unbuckled her seat belt. She floated out of her chair. She reached out both hands and swiped at the tooth.

Missed!

The tooth floated higher and higher... toward some kind of air vent. I unbuckled myself, kicked off, and went sailing up out of my chair. I floated toward the top of the capsule - and dove for the tooth. My fingers wrapped around it. But the tooth slid right through them and sailed higher. Marnie and I bumped heads.

"OW!" I cried. "Look out!"

"How can I look out?" Marnie cried. "I've never flown before."

"It's going into that vent!" I cried. We both stretched our arms out, trying to fly higher. Thankfully, I managed to grab it and pull it close to me. "Yes!"

But Marnie and I flew into each other again. My arms got tangled in hers. We struggled to pull apart.

"We're upside down!"

Marnie tried to swing herself around... and kicked me in the chest. Now, we were both sailing down headfirst.

"Can't... turn... around... " I said. And then my head bumped the control panel. "Ouch!"

I heard another thud. Marnie winced as she bumped the panel, too. The whole capsule jerked and tilted from side to side.

And then I could feel it start to fall. Floating in front of the window, I felt a strong pull against me, like a magnet pulling me down.

"We're dropping!" I shouted.

Out the window, I could see the blue-and-green ball of Remnant appear to grow larger. The capsule picked up speed as it fell. Faster ... faster. I could feel the pressure. Feel the incredible pull. It felt like someone was trying to pull my skin off! I couldn't move ... couldn't breathe. Remnant rose up in front of us, bigger ... BIGGER.

"We're falling FAST!" Marnie shrieked. "We're going to crash!"

I gaped in horror as our planet filled the whole window.

The tooth. Andy, the tooth.

The words flew through my brain. In my total panic, I'd forgotten about it. I had it gripped tightly in my fist. I squeezed it hard. I struggled to breathe. I couldn't think straight. We were hurtling toward Remnant, about to smash into the planet. I pictured us crushed, like an egg tossed against a brick wall.

What should I wish for?

"I-I wish I was back in my own bed!" I choked out.

Will it work?

RRRRRRRRRRIPPPPP!

I heard the sound again. And felt myself being snapped away. A bright whir of dancing colors flew past my eyes. They spun so fast that they made me dizzy. I clamped my eyes shut. And felt a hard thud. The landing knocked my breath out. Choking, I opened my eyes and stared up at solid blue. It took me a long moment to realize I was lying in bed. My head rested on a pillow. The covers were pulled up to my chin. A black-and-red bedspread. MY bedspread.

Yes! The tooth had come through again and granted my wish!

I was definitely in my own bed. But where was I?

I stared up at the solid blue. A pale, white cloud floated into view. The sky. I was gazing up at the sky. How did my bed get outdoors? I pushed down the bedspread, swung my feet to the ground, and sat up. My eyes focused on a curtain of metal bars. A wall of thin bars rose up high above my head.

Cage bars?

Yes. I twisted around and gazed behind me. There were bars all around me. A cage. I was in a large cage. The ground was soft black dirt. I saw leafy trees inside the cage.

"Huh?"

With a gasp, I jumped to my feet. My heart began to race in my chest. The cage was huge, bigger than my front yard. I saw a tire swing hanging from a limb of a tree. A row of tall bushes. A red-and-blue beach ball rested in a big sandbox, like you see in kiddie playgrounds.

"What's up with this?" I asked.

I took a few steps across the dirt... and realized I wasn't alone. Eyes stared in at me from the other side of the cage bars. I gasped when the faces came into focus. People were staring into the cage ... staring at ME!

Was I in a zoo?

I saw about a dozen people. Some of them had goofy grins on their faces. They stared at me, poked each other, and giggled and pointed. Were they laughing at me? I struggled to get over my shock.

"Hey! Hey - where am I?" I shouted. They jabbered back at me in funny, squeaky voices, like cartoon voices. I couldn't understand

them at all. It sounded like gibberish. I could feel the panic sweeping over me. "Hey! Answer me! Where am I?"

"Hubbahubbahubba."

"Do you think I'm some kind of monkey?" I shouted, grabbing the cage bars.

That's when I realized they weren't staring at me. They were staring past me. I wasn't alone in the cage. I heard heavy thuds pound the ground behind me. I swung around - and stared at a huge creature with dark brown fur. At least four or five feet taller than me and as wide as a Jeep! It lumbered forward on its two fat, furry legs, kicking up black clouds of dirt. He gnashed two giant rows of teeth together as he thundered closer. His big black eyes were locked on mine.

It was an enormous ape, like out of a horror movie. He kicked the beach ball against the cage bars and kept coming.

"I'm not a monkey!" I screamed. "I'm not a monkey!"

I was out of my head with fear. I didn't know what I was saying. The big ape didn't seem to care. He tossed back his furry head and snarled. Then he gnashed his teeth together furiously. He stopped for a moment and picked up a disgusting blob of grass and weeds from the dirt before shoving it into his big mouth and swallowing it whole. It seemed like he wanted to show what he was going to do with me.

But apes don't eat meat - DO they?!

Outside the cage, the crowd grew quiet. No one moved. No one blinked. The snarling ape strode closer, kicking up a tornado of dirt.

"The tooth!" I shouted, suddenly remembering it.

Yes. The tooth. It was my only way out. Why had I waited so long? I grabbed it, wrapped my hand around it, and lifted it from the front of

my shirt. But before I could make my escape wish, the ape reached out an enormous paw... and swiped it from me.

"Hey!" I shouted as I made a frantic dive for it.

I bounced off his leg and landed hard in the swirling dirt. I then saw the ape stomp away with the tooth. The huge ape smacked the tire swing as he stomped past it. The tire rocked back and forth so hard the whole tree shook.

"Give that tooth back!" I shouted. The furry ape turned and raised the tooth in the air.

WAIT!

WAS HE GOING TO THROW IT OUT OF THE CAGE?!

I froze. In my panic, I knew I had to get that tooth back. If I didn't, I could spend the rest of my life in this zoo cage. The giant ape held the tooth up close to his face like he was studying it. He held the tooth out to me. Then he pulled back his arm and tossed the tooth over the cage bars. No. He only pretended to toss the tooth. He held it up to show me the tooth was still gripped tightly in his paw. The creature was teasing me with it!

What could I do?

Fear paralyzed my brain. I couldn't think of anything. A gust of wind blew through the cage. The beach ball bounced against my legs. With a sigh, I started to kick it out of my way. But then I stopped. I had an idea. I picked up the big ball in both hands.

Was the huge ape ready for a game of catch?

I raised the beach ball over my head and heaved it at the ape. The ape caught the ball in midair. And the tooth fell from his hand to the ground. I made a wild dive into the dirt. My hand scraped the ape's foot. My fingers wrapped around the leather cord.

Wet! The tooth had landed in a puddle of water!

I snatched the tooth up and raised it to my face. The ape leaned down and made a wild grab for me with both paws. I rolled out from under the giant creature while squeezing the tooth.

"I wish I was back home safe and sound!" I screamed while closing my eyes.

ZZZZZZZAAAAAPPPPPPP!

A powerful current shocked my body. My arms shot up over my head. All my muscles tensed, then throbbed with pain.

Another electrical shock.

My teeth clamped together. I bit my tongue. My throat closed. I couldn't breathe. And still, the current jolted through me, making me toss, spin, and dance, a dance of pain and terror. The last thing I saw were those big black ape eyes... gleaming black... staring at me in surprise. The creature's eyes seemed to grow... to inflate to the size of black balloons.

And then, everything went black.

"Ohhhh." A sharp pain made the back of my head throb.

I tried to raise my head, but it felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds. I opened my eyes. I saw a bright blur of yellow and white, like a fried egg, in front of my face. I blinked until my eyes started to focus. I was gazing up at a high ceiling. The yellow yolk was a ceiling light.

"Where am I?" I groaned.

My voice sounded hoarse as if I'd been asleep for a long time. I stretched my arms at my sides. I was sprawled on my back on a hard floor. I tried my legs. I pulled my knees up, sliding my shoes on the floor. Yes. Legs and arms were working. Faces appeared over

me. Worried faces, squinting at me, studying me with tight-lipped frowns. And then Marnie's face floated over me.

"Andy? Are you waking up?" Marnie asked.

"I don't know," I murmured, rubbing the back of my head. "Am I awake? Where are we?"

Several people were kneeling at my sides. A white-haired woman was leaning over me, squeezing my wrist, taking my pulse. A very pale man with thick eyeglasses helped pull me to a sitting position. I leaned my head against a tile wall. In front of me, I saw a familiar store window: Shoe Universe.

"Did anyone call for an ambulance?" The man asked. "Does he need an ambulance?"

"Did he faint?" A woman said. "Does he have a medical condition?"

"I don't think he needs an ambulance." The white-haired woman said before letting go of my wrist. Then she squinted at me. "Do you remember your name and address?"

"Yes. I'm Andy Meadows." I said before telling her my address.

"If you have a headache later, you should call your doctor." The lady said while standing up.

"Okay." I said. Shaking their heads and murmuring to each other, people started to leave. Marnie dropped down beside me.

"Andy, you got a nasty shock." Marnie said.

"Oh, my gosh! Marnie, how did you get here?" I asked, relieved. She frowned at me.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I-I totally forgot about you! I'm so sorry! I left you in that space capsule! I can't believe I did that! How did you get back to the mall from outer space?"

"Uh-oh. Did you say outer space?" Marnie said, paling. I nodded but wince when a pang of pain shot through my body. She then stood up. "Maybe you DO need a doctor. You're not making any sense. I'll call your mom and dad. I'll tell them what happened. It won't take them long to get here."

"But, Marnie -" I grabbed her arm and pulled her back down beside me. "Remember? I was in bed? In a strange room. Not my own room. With people I'd never seen before. I made a wish. And we were in the space capsule. Then, it began to fall to Remnant. Then I was in a weird zoo. In a cage, like an animal. A huge ape came after me, and-"

"Andy, don't move," Marnie said, pulling my hand off her arm before jumping up. She pointed a trembling finger down at me. "Don't move."

"But, Marnie-"

"I'll get help," she said. She looked around frantically. "Listen. You're all mixed up. You've been here in the mall the whole time."

"Huh?" I gasped. "No way -"

"Andy, you got a shock, and it knocked you out. You've been out for almost ten minutes."

"Huh? Only ten minutes?" I said, confused. It felt like hours.

"Ten minutes," she said. "I was SO worried-"

"But what about the space capsule? The ape in the zoo?"

"You haven't moved, Andy. You've been flat out on your back. The shock must have given you some weird dreams."

My head was spinning. I felt totally confused. Of course. Those adventures had to be dreams. My brain went berserk while I was out cold. With a groan, I hoisted myself to my feet and shook off my dizziness. A few worried adults were still there watching me. I told them I felt fine. I watched them stroll away down the wide aisles.

"I feel a lot better." I told Marnie while stretching.

I was about to continue but stopped when something caught my eye. My breath caught in my throat. I stared hard. And then I let out a cry:

"Marnie - why are YOU wearing my tooth?"

"No. No fever." Marnie said, placing her hand on my forehead. I kept staring at the big tooth dangling from the cord around her neck.

"My tooth-"

"Your tooth?" Marnie said. "Oh, wow. Since when is it your tooth?"

"But-but-"

"You're starting to scare me, Andy. I mean, really. I'm really worried about you. You hit your head on the hard floor when you fell. Maybe you have a concussion or something."

"I-I don't understand."

"The tooth is mine," Marnie said. She squeezed it between two fingers. "It's never been yours."

"Not true! I bought it and-" I shouted. She raised a finger to my lips to hush me up.

"Don't you remember, Andy? At HorrorLand? We were in that little shop, and you didn't want the tooth. That weird shopkeeper offered it to you first. And you said you thought it was dumb."

"Wait. That's not what I remember. I -"

"So I bought it from the shopkeeper. Chiller, or whatever his name was. I thought it was cool looking, so I bought it. It's my tooth. It's always been my tooth."

I felt dizzy again. The store windows tilted and swayed. The bright lights flickered above me. I shut my eyes and waited for the dizziness to pass.

'Is my memory totally messed up?' I asked myself.

I thought I was the one who bought the tooth. Was that another one of my crazy dreams? It didn't seem like a dream. Why did I remember so clearly that the wishing tooth belonged to me? I had to get it straight in my mind. I hated feeling so totally confused. I grabbed Marnie's shoulder.

"Marnie, remember? A few days after we got back from HorrorLand? You were at my house, and my parents were talking about dinner. I had the tooth, and I made a wish that we would go out for dinner. Then, instantly, my dad said, 'Let's go out for dinner.' Remember?"

"Excuse me?" Marnie said, acting offended. "Don't you remember? I made all the wishes, Andy. I wished that I could go with you. I wished your dad had a new car?"

"But-but-"

"Don't you remember? I wished to get twice as many French fries as you. And my wish came true?"

"Well ... yes. Yes, I remember that. But -"

"And then I wished for a cow to appear in school so we'd get out for the day?"

"Yes. I remember that, too."

"I made all the wishes because the tooth was mine. I was wearing it, Andy. So I made all those wishes." Marnie said, secretly happy that

she was fooling Andy.

I swallowed. I felt a shiver run down my back.

"Do you think I'm going crazy?"

"I think the shock messed up your memory. You had all those weird dreams while you were knocked out. And you imagined the tooth was yours."

"But it seems so real. Me wearing the tooth to school and to the mall and-"

"Andy, it's been in my dresser drawer since last Monday, the day I wished for the cow in school. You never owned the tooth. It's mine. Today is the first day I took it out of my drawer."

"Are you sure?" My voice came out high and tiny. Marnie nodded.

"Don't you remember any of this? I brought the tooth to the mall. And I started to make a wish in front of the shoe store. But I dropped the tooth. You tried to pick it up for me, remember? And then you got that terrible shock?"

I leaned against the wall. My brain was spinning in my head. I felt sick. My stomach lurched. I held my breath and pressed my hand over my mouth to keep from heaving.

"Are you okay? Are you feeling sick?" Marnie asked, paling.

"A... little." I barely managed to choke out.

I couldn't stop my brain from churning. How could my memory play such weird tricks on me? The tooth belongs to Marnie? Marnie bought the tooth necklace from Jonathan Chiller? For a moment, I had the strangest feeling.

'I'm still messed up!' I thought.

I'm confused because I'm in a dream. I'm going to wake up and remember it all just the way it really happened. But I knew that was wrong. I knew I was awake. No space capsule. No giant ape in a zoo cage. No dream. Just the real world. There was only one thing wrong. My brain was completely scrambled.

Real World

"If it weren't for the fact that I knew it was a magic tooth that caused that, I would have said that Andy went on one hell of an acid trip." Coco said before growling. "But wow. That was one scumbag move on Marnie's part."

"Yeah." Yatsuhashi agreed while Fox narrowed his eyes.

"If that happened to me and I realized it, Marnie wouldn't have any teeth left in her mouth and two black eyes." Yang said.

"While I would prefer to handle situations peacefully if it can be done, especially when it comes to family or close friends, I would have gladly turned a blind eye and make an exception for this." Ren said.

"I know I would. Instead of helping a family member who was badly hurt, she took the moment to steal the tooth. Then, while he was still getting his mind together, she lied to make him believe it was hers all this time." Velvet said.

"Now you guys know why Marnie never had many friends to begin with." Jaune said.

"I know I would never be friends with someone like that." Pyrrha said.

BARK! BARK! BARK!

"Zwei. We get it. You don't... uh. Where's Zwei?" Ruby began before asking when she didn't see Zwei anymore.

"What do you mean? He's by the... never mind." Nora said, turning to the window and not seeing Zwei.

"Do you think he went outside or to another room?" Weiss asked.

"Possibly to another room since all the doors are closed and locked, and we don't have any doggy doors." Jaune answered.

AAWWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! GRRRRRR!

"Okay. That sounded like it was right next door." Yatsuhashi said.

"Yeah." Everyone except Blake agreed.

"Uh. Jaune." Blake said.

"Yes, Blake?" Jaune asked, turning to her and noticing how pale she was. Sweat was pouring down her forehead while goosebumps covered his skin.

"Uh. What breed was the Ghost Dog again?"

"Blue Kerlew Hound. Well, that's what the villagers called it."

"Do you know what it looks like, aside from being a ghost and see-through?"

"It's completely blue, whiteish-glowing eyes, and seemingly very muscular. He also has a blue snout. But that's all I can really tell you since he is a ghost and somewhat see-through. Why?" Jaune asked, curious.

Instead of answering, Blake raised a trembling hand and pointed behind herself. Curious but also confused, everyone looked past Blake and saw something that nearly made some of them faint.

It was the Ghost Dog.

And it looked pissed.

"SHIT!" Everyone shouted as they stood up and pulled out their weapon. But they were highly doubted they could do anything as the Ghost Dog passed through the couch like it wasn't even there.

"W-what do we do?" Velvet asked.

"I-I have no idea." Jaune stuttered as the Ghost Dog slowly moved forward.

BARK! BARK! BARK! Zwei barked as he appeared in front of the Ghost Dog and stood his ground.

"ZWEI!" Ruby shouted, both relieved that Zwei was alright but scared that he could get hurt.

However, it seemed like Zwei would be fine as his barks started echoing while his eyes turned yellow and his pupils turned to black slits. The Ghost Dog seemed curious about Zwei as it tilted its head to the side. But it then looked back to the teens as if wanting to convey something. Then, in a surprising move, the Ghost Dog moved past Zwei, grabbed Jaune's book, and brought it to them. It placed it on the ground and flipped it open to the page they were just on about its story before pushing it close to Jaune by using its snout.

"Y-You want me to finish reading your s-story with Andy and Marnie?" Jaune hesitantly asked, earning a nod from the Ghost Dog.

"Jaune. Don't." Velvet began, grabbing his arm. But she stopped when the Ghost Dog quickly turned to her and growled.

"I-it'll be alright, Velvet." Jaune said, picking up the book. "Okay. Let's continue."

Story

"How did it go at the mall?" Mom asked.

"Uh ... not bad," I said.

I probably should have told the truth. But I wanted to go up to my room and think and be by myself. You know. Try to get my brain straight. Mom and Dad were on the den floor with a Scrabble board spread out on the coffee table. They play the slowest, most boring Scrabble games. It's painful to play with them. They spend hours with their little dictionary, looking up words and then arguing about them. Somehow, Mom always wins. I don't see the fun in it. But they love it. I said good night and hurried away. I was halfway up the stairs when Mom's voice stopped me.

"Andy, let me see the sneakers you bought." Mom said.

Sneakers? Uh-oh.

"Uh . . . I didn't buy any." I said.

"You're kidding. Why not?"

"Just didn't see any I liked. Guess I'll have to go back."

"What did you buy there?" Dad called.

"Uh ... well ... nothing/ You see, I got a very bad shock that knocked me out and made me have all these crazy dreams. And now my memory is totally messed up. And I'm freaking out because my brain is fried."

"That's nice." Dad said. "See you in the morning."

"Good night, dear." Mom added.

I knew they weren't listening! Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. It takes a lot to get them to even look up from their game. Shaking my head, I climbed the rest of the way to my room. And before I entered my room, I could hear them start to argue again.

"Fleg is not a word." Mom said.

"Sure, it is." Dad said. "Look it up."

"No need. There's no such word as fleg. What is a fleg, anyway? Use it in a sentence."

"Okay. We fly the fleg on the Fourth of July."

They both broke up laughing. I closed my bedroom door. I wasn't in the mood for Dad's horrible Scrabble jokes.

My head felt like someone was pounding on it with a big wood mallet. I decided to go to bed early. When I wake up in the morning, the headache will be gone. And my memory will be back. That's what I told myself. I changed into my pajamas and climbed into bed. Then I pulled the covers up to my chin and shut my eyes. It felt really good to be back in my own bed in my own room. I settled my head deep into my pillow. I let out a long sigh and tried to relax.

But the sound outside my open window made me sit up with a jerk. A long, low moan. Not a human sound. And then another, higher, closer. An animal howl. It rose and fell like an ambulance siren. And then another. A dog's howl. An angry howl.

The Blue Kerlew Hound!

I knew it had to be that long-dead creature. The ghostly dog prowling right outside my house. Howling... howling up at my window.

But... why?

I didn't have its tooth. Why was it coming after me? Another terrifying howl sent a chill down my back. I jumped out of bed. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I hurried to my window and peered down at the front yard. No dog.

Pale moonlight made the yard look silvery, eerie. The flowers in my mom's flower bed swayed from side to side in a gusty breeze. A chipmunk scampered behind the big maple tree by the curb.

Was the ghostly dog invisible?

I hugged myself tightly, trying to stop my chills. The next long howl made me jump. It seemed to be coming from right inside my room. I spun around with a loud gasp.

No. Calm down, Andy. Take a deep breath, dude.

No way I could get to sleep. I clicked on my desk lamp and dropped down in front of my computer. I brought up Google and typed in Blue Kerlew Hound. After a few seconds, the screen changed. I blinked, surprised that only a single entry came up. It had the headline: CREATURES OF LEGEND & MYTH. I clicked on it, and it took me to a weird site about Scotland. A long article filled the screen. I scrolled down, searching for a picture. Something to show me what the hound looked like. But no. No image or drawing.

I went back up to the top and began to read. The whole story was there. The same story Jonathan Chiller told us in his shop at HorrorLand. My eyes scanned down the screen, and I read the story all over again. The tiny town in the Highlands of Scotland... the mysterious blue dog... the bad luck it brought the town... the sorcerer who cursed the dog's teeth to drive it away... the sorcerer discovering the one tooth could grant wishes... the night the dog returned, and the sorcerer was found torn to pieces. It was all there. But then there was more. My mouth dropped open as I read the bottom of the article.

The part Jonathan Chiller didn't tell us . . . It said: ***"The tooth has been missing for three hundred years. No one knows if it is owned by anyone or if it has disappeared for all time. Over time, the legend of the Kerlew Hound's tooth grew. It was said that the ghost dog roams Remnant, looking for its missing tooth. And that each wish made with the tooth sends a signal. The hound follows the signals. And when the dog finally finds its tooth, the owner will share the same horrifying fate as the sorcerer."***

My heart thundered in my chest as I read the last sentences: ***"Of course, the story of the Blue Kerlew Hound is only legend, a***

tale made up in the Highlands of Scotland. But those people who know the legend admit they would not keep the tooth if they found it. No one wants to come face-to-face with the deadly hound."

Taking a look at the time, I saw that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. But I didn't care. I had to warn Marnie. I had to warn her that every wish she made on the tooth was dangerous. I picked up my jeans from where I'd tossed them on the floor. I dug my cell phone out of my pocket and punched in Marnie's number. I listened to it ring... two times... three... four... Finally, Marnie answered.

"Andy? What do you want?" Her voice was hoarse.

"I know I woke you up." I said. "But this is important."

"It better be. What do you want?" Marnie is a total grouch when you wake her up.

"Don't use the tooth anymore. Every wish is dangerous. No more wishes, Marnie. Every wish brings the blue hound closer."

Silence for a long moment. Then Marnie burst out laughing.

"Nice try, Andy." she said. "Did you think that up all by yourself?"

"No. Really-" I said.

"That's how jealous you are? You'd try a cheap trick like that to stop me from using my tooth?"

"Marnie, listen to me. You can look it up yourself. I'm not making it up-"

"Andy, you tried to convince me we were in outer space - remember? Why

should I believe a word you say?"

"It's true. It's really dangerous. Don't use the tooth, Marnie."

"Well, you just watch me tomorrow, Andy. Stand back and watch me - because I'm going to have some fun!"

I couldn't get to sleep for hours. When my alarm went off, I yawned and squinted out my bedroom window. The sky was almost as dark as night, with storm clouds hanging low over the trees. I groaned and tried to sit up. I felt as if I had dark storm clouds fogging my brain.

At breakfast the following day, Mom gave me a hard time about not buying sneakers.

"I can't believe you wasted all that time yesterday, Andy. What did you do

with the money I gave you?" She asked.

"I still have it." I said. "No problem. I was trying to be a good shopper."

"Good shopper?" Dad looked up from his laptop and laughed. "How can you be a good shopper if you don't buy anything?"

I wanted to tell them that I was serious about the electrical shock and everything. But then they would probably keep me out of school, ask me a million questions, and make me see Dr Hanson. I tilted the bowl to my mouth and slurped down the last drops of milk from my cornflakes.

"I have to go." I said before heading outside.

Getting on my bike, I rode it to school. I was half a block away when the rain started to come down. I tossed my bike at the bike rack and went running into the building. I strode down the hall, shaking off water. My jacket was soaked through. And my hair was matted flat against my head. I pulled open my locker. Marnie came running up.

"Andy, you feeling okay?" She asked. But she didn't give me a chance to answer. Instead, she swung herself around. "Check out the new backpack. It's Prada. Feel the leather."

"Smooth," I said, feeling the leather. "Doesn't that cost, like, a thousand dollars or something?"

"I didn't pay for it. I wished for it." Then I saw the big tooth dangling on its cord around her neck. "These new jeans, too. I never had straight-leg jeans that fit this well. Think I'm going to wish for another pair."

"Listen, Marnie, I Googled the whole thing last night." I said, chasing after Marnie as she ran down the hallway. "The tooth is more dangerous than Jonathan Chiller told us."

"We've been there, Andy." She said, rolling her eyes. "Remember? You called me last night. I didn't believe you then. Why should I believe you now?"

"Because it's true."

"Got to go, dude."

"I-I heard the dog again last night. Every wish brings it closer."

"If the big blue dog comes after me, I'll wish it away!" Marnie said. Then she ran to catch up to her friend that I didn't recognize. She must have wished for her to be a friend. I then watched her showing off her new backpack.

The hall was noisy, with kids shouting and laughing and locker doors slamming. But in my mind, I kept hearing the eerie howls, the mournful cries that had kept me up most of the night. I half-slept through class all morning. Luckily, Mrs. Parker didn't call on me. When the bell rang for our mid-morning break, Marnie came running up to me with a big grin. She waved a paper in front of my face.

"Andy, check it out. I grabbed it and studied it. "Your math quiz? You got an A?"

"You . .. you wished it? Andy, I'm never going to get a bad grade in math again! I'm a genius now. I'm a math genius!"

"Nice." I said. My stomach suddenly felt as if I'd swallowed a big rock. "How many wishes are you going to make today?"

"Maybe a million." She gave me a punch in the stomach and hurried away.

I stood there, thinking hard. What if the story I read last night was true? What if every wish Marnie made brought the ghost hound closer? I felt totally tense. Every muscle in my body had a knot in it. Worst of all, my memory still wasn't working. I didn't remember anything correctly that happened before the electrical shock.

I jumped when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Mrs. Parker gazing down at me. Mrs. Parker is about six feet tall and very thin. She has blond hair and blue eyes and looks like a model in some of the magazines that moms read. Mrs. Parker told us that she came from Norway, where just about everyone looks like her. Now, all of us guys want to move to Norway!

"Andy, what are you thinking about so intensely?" she asked.

"Uh ... math." I lied.

"Why don't I believe you?" Mrs. Parker laughed.

"Because I'm lying?" That made her laugh even harder.

"We're having a very interesting assembly this afternoon. Congressman Boltz is going to tell us some fascinating things that have happened to him in Washington."

'Oh, thrills.' I thought. *'Maybe if I sit in a back row, I can catch up on my sleep.'*

"And he's going to announce the winner of the five-hundred-dollar essay prize."

"I could win that," I said. "I worked really hard on that essay."

"Yes, you did." Mrs. Parker said, smiling. "I thought yours was the best, Andy. The best by far. But I wasn't one of the judges."

"Now I really am thinking of math." I said. "I'm thinking about the number five hundred!"

"Good luck," Mrs. Parker said as the bell rang. She then headed to her desk to get ready for class.

All through class, I kept thinking about the five hundred dollars. Thinking about how Mrs. Parker said my essay was the best. How big of an idiot I am? Possibly the biggest idiot by far. Why did I even think I had a chance when Marnie had the tooth? Yet, I still hoped I would win.

I stayed awake all through Congressman Boltz's talk in the auditorium. He had some pretty funny stories about going to the wrong meetings and getting locked in his office one night. He was younger than I thought he'd be. Actually, he was a pretty cool guy. And then it came time to announce the big prize winner in the essay contest. I sat up straight in my seat and gripped the chair's arms. I held my breath.

A hush fell over the auditorium. A lot of kids had entered the essay contest. A lot of kids believed they had a chance of winning. Jerks. All of us. But then all my hope of winning the competition came crashing down. How big of an idiot I am? Possibly the biggest idiot by far. Why did I even think I had a chance when Marnie had the tooth? Because, of course, Congressman Boltz leaned into the microphone and announced:

"The grand prize winner is sixth-grader... Marnie Myers!"

Some kids cheered as Marnie jumped up. She acted totally surprised. She screamed, jumped up and down, tore at her hair, and even had tears in her eyes. I just groaned and slumped down in my seat as low as I could go. I covered my face with my hands. I didn't want to watch her go onstage and collect the big check. I never had a chance. School ended after the assembly. Some kids wanted to hang around the playground and get up a soccer game. But I told them I had to hurry home. I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I saw Marnie joining the game. I knew she'd suddenly be the best soccer player in school history.

Another wish... and another wish... and another wish. When I shut my eyes, I could picture the snarling blue hound ripping us both apart... tearing off our arms and legs... snapping and frothing, chewing... chewing... until we were just scraps of meat.

All because Marnie wouldn't stop wishing.

I slumped home, kicking stones and things out of my way. Mom and Dad were at work. I was glad. I didn't want to talk to them, either. I was in a very bad mood. And for some reason, I felt like it was about to get even worse.

I pulled myself up to my bedroom. I was hot and sweaty from the walk home, so I tugged off my T-shirt and grabbed a fresh one from the dresser drawer. But before I pulled it on, I caught a glimpse of myself in the dresser mirror. And I let out a scream of total shock.

I leaned over the dresser and brought my face up close to the mirror. I was breathing hard, my chest thumping. My breath steamed the glass. It had to be a shadow I'd seen. That dark line across my neck. I raised my fingers to it. No. Not a shadow. It was real. A cut on my neck. A dark red line.

"A bruise." I whispered to myself.

I grabbed the top of the dresser with both hands and turned my face one way, then the other. Yes, that thin line was a bruise. The bruise

that Marnie gave me when she tried to tug the tooth cord off my neck while we were in front of the shoe store. She tried to take it away from me. I remembered so clearly. She pulled so hard that the leather dug into my neck.

The bruise was still there!

"Marnie LIED! LIED!" I screamed. "MARNIE LIED!"

I stood there screaming at my reflection in the dresser mirror. She wanted the tooth so badly. She said she would do ANYTHING to have the tooth. So when I got that shock... when I blacked out... when I was out cold... she TOOK it. She put the tooth around her neck. And when I woke up, she made me think I was crazy. She made me think my memory was messed up. She really made me believe that the tooth had been hers the whole time.

Wow!

I stared into the mirror at the bruise on my neck.

Wow. Wow. Wow.

I knew Marnie wanted the tooth badly. But I didn't realize HOW badly. Bad enough to make her own cousin think he was losing his mind! And now, here she was, making wish after wish after wish. Acing every quiz and test, winning big bucks in the essay contest. Getting everything she wanted.

With MY tooth!

Mine! Mine!

I couldn't help it. My anger boiled over. I felt like my head exploded. I totally lost it. I started pounding the dresser with both fists.

Pounding it!

Punching it!

As if it were Marnie!

Punching the dresser again and again, I kept punching it until my fists throbbed.

I stopped when I saw my mom's reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were bulging, and her mouth hung wide open. Panting hard, my fists aching, I slowly turned to face her.

"Andy?" She asked, staring hard at me. "Andy? Are you okay?"

"No. I'm not okay." I answered. "I have to murder my cousin. I have no choice, Mom. I'm really sorry, but I have to murder my cousin Marnie."

"Go ahead. That's no problem. I don't like her, either."

That didn't really happen. I didn't say that, and Mom sure didn't say that, either. I was so angry, so out of control; that's what I wished we had said. But it went something like this.

"Andy? What are you doing? Are you okay?" Mom asked.

"Uh, yeah, Mom. One of the dresser drawers stuck. That's all." I answered.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm fine, Mom. Really." I could see that she didn't believe me. But she finally turned and started for the hall.

"Don't beat up your furniture, Andy."

"No, Mom. I'll try to give the dresser a break."

She headed downstairs to make dinner. I let out a long sigh. My fists ached from pounding my poor dresser. I knew who I really wanted to pound. I kept picturing Marnie leaning over me at the mall, acting so

worried after I'd been knocked out, asking me if I was okay with my tooth dangling around her neck.

I sat down in my desk chair. My head spun with plan after plan for revenge. I saw myself grabbing the tooth away from Marnie. Then I'd wish that she would turn into a chicken. And there she'd be, all brown and yellow feathers, clucking away, pecking the floor for seed. Then, maybe after a few weeks, I'd decide to give her a break and change her back. That made me laugh. I imagined changing Marnie into all kinds of animals. Maybe a big, fat cow. Then she could stampede through the school, and we'd all get the day off again!

Not bad.

But I knew I could do better. If I thought about it long enough, I knew I could plan the perfect revenge. I was still plotting and scheming later that night as I climbed into bed... and heard the animal howl outside my window. The revenge plots leaped from my mind. I sat up straight and listened.

Another howl rose from beneath my window. So close. It could be coming from my room! That thought sent a cold shiver down my whole body. Did anyone else hear it? Once again, I tiptoed to the window. I pulled it open all the way. A cool gust of wind brushed my pajamas.

The dog howled again.

Could it be the Blue Kerlew? Was it back for its tooth?

I gripped the ledge and leaned out the window. I stared down into total darkness. I couldn't even see the flower bed at the side of the house. Another frightening howl. And then I saw it. I SAW it! And in that instant, I knew what my revenge against Marnie was going to be. I knew the dog

would bring me my revenge!

Real World

"Okay. I'm liking Marnie less and less." Coco said.

"Yeah." Everyone else agreed. But they all tensed when the Ghost Dog growled.

"I-I think he does not like Marnie either." Blake nervously said, earning a nod from the Ghost Dog, surprising them.

"Uh. Can the Ghost Dog understand us, Jaune?" Ren asked.

"I'm pretty sure he can, along with many others we will encounter." Pyrrha answered before Jaune could say anything. But they couldn't dwell on it as the Ghost Dog nodded again.

"Pyrrha's right. Most... creatures can understand us, even if they don't speak our language or languages in general. We don't know why or how, but it is convenient." Jaune said.

"Is there any way we can understand the Ghost Dog?" Velvet asked, curious.

"I would say the tooth since it's the first thing to come to mind, but I'm not sure if it would even work." Jaune answered with the Ghost Dog shaking its head. "Anyway. We're just about done. It was a few days later, and Andy rushed to sit beside Marnie as she sat in the cafeteria, eating her lunch."

Story

"Marnie, I can't sleep at night because that creepy dog keeps howling

outside my window." I said. "Could you use your tooth for me? Make a wish that the dog would go away?"

"I'm kind of busy." She said, scrunching up her face.

"Well, could you maybe help me with something else?"She waved to some girls at a table across the lunchroom. She wasn't even listening to me. "I'm building a game arcade machine for my class project. It's going to be awesome. Just like the game machines they have in arcades."

"So?"

"I downloaded a ton of old video games. And I have a monitor to use. But I'm having trouble building the box for it. Could you make a wish that I get it done in time?"

"I don't think so." Marnie said. "That really wouldn't be fair to the other kids, would it?"

"But-" She waved me off and hurried to join her friends. I almost tossed my lunch tray at her. That really was the last straw.

Saturday afternoon, I called Marnie.

"Can you come over?" I asked.

"I don't know." Marnie said. She sounded out of breath. "I just won a tennis tournament. You know. At the indoor courts. It was a long match. It took five sets. I let the other girl win a couple of sets. You know. To make it look good."

"Wow. You really are enjoying that wishing tooth, aren't you? I guess you're glad you bought it."

"Hello. It's the best thing I have ever bought. Too bad that guy Chiller didn't have one for you, Andy." I balled my hands into tight fists. I wanted to growl like an animal into the phone.

"Yeah. Too bad. Listen, Marnie, I need help with my game machine. The one I told you about? Can you come over? All of my friends are busy."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'm building the frame for it. And I can't do it by myself."

"If we finish it, can we play it?"

"Yeah. Sure. I downloaded all the great old games. Ms. Pac-Man... Frogger... Space Invaders... "

"Cool."

I knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to come over, play my game machine - and beat me at all the games. Is there a more competitive person in the world than Marnie? I don't think so. Without thinking, I was rubbing the slender bruise on my neck.

"So, can you come over and help me?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm probably better at building that thing than you. See you after lunch."

Two Hours Later

Marnie and I were working in my garage. First, she had to show off the cool new leather jacket she had wished for and received for free. The tooth was around her neck, under her T-shirt. I could see the leather cord. Everyone in sixth grade has to build some kind of machine.

Last week, I downloaded the video games onto my dad's old computer. Now, the plan was to build a wooden case around the computer to make it look like an arcade game. Dad and I bought the lumber we needed. We

painted it all bright red and yellow. And Dad helped me saw it into the right shapes. Now I just had to fasten the sides and back together. Fit the computer inside so the monitor screen shows in the front. Set up the control pads. And nail on the bottom.

I had the plans all drawn out. It wasn't hard. It just took two people. Marnie and I carefully fit one of the red side panels to the back. I had

a jar of nails ready. I poured some of them onto the garage floor and picked up a hammer.

"Just hold the two boards like this." I said. "And I'll pound in a few nails."

"Where does the power cord go?" She asked as she pressed the side and backboards together.

"See that hole in the back panel? It'll fit through there."

"And what about ventilation? Did you leave room for a fan or anything?"

'What a know-it-all! Did she always have to show off?' I thought, annoyed. "It won't get too hot. I left plenty of air space around the computer."

"This is awesome. If it works."

"It'll work," I said as I pounded in the first nail. It was a little crooked, but it went in regardless.

"I can pound straighter than that. Here. Give me the hammer. I'll do it." Before I could say anything, we heard a sound.

A dog's howl.

"Hey!" I shouted as I jumped and accidentally kicked over a jar of nails. The dog's howl rose high and shrill, then dropped. It sounded so close - like it was in the driveway. "D-did you hear that?"

"Is that the dog you heard before?" She asked, a look of fear on her face.

"I... think so."

The dog howled again. The sound echoed off the concrete garage walls. Marnie dropped the two boards. They clattered onto the floor

in front of her. She took a step back.

"It sounds... ghostly. Close and far away at the same time. Not like a real dog." She whispered. The next howl was even closer. And then I saw the creature's shadow slide over the driveway by the garage door.

"Look out. Here it comes." I said, my voice trembling. Marnie's eyes grew wide. She took another step back and stumbled into my dad's power mower.

"Ow!" Marnie grunted as she tumbled into the garage wall, and a garden rake fell off its hook and crashed to the concrete floor.

I kicked it out of the way. Then I backed up beside Marnie. We both watched as the shadow lengthened over the driveway. A dark head slid into view. Marnie gasped. The big front paws moved silently over the ground. The dog lowered its head as it stepped into its own shadow.

"A hound dog!" I whispered to Marnie as I started to tremble.

She swallowed and tried to speak. But no sound came out. The dog lumbered into the shade of the garage. Its big dark eyes were wet as it turned its gaze on us. Its long, ragged ears drooped down. Its tongue hung loosely out of one side of its gaping mouth.

"It's... so big!" Marnie murmured, finally finding her voice. The dog uttered a low growl.

"Marnie - look at its fur! It's... BLUE!"

"It... it can't be!" Marnie said, teeth chattering.

"The B-blue Kerlew Hound!" Growling softly, it moved toward us, head lowered, wet eyes in a dead stare.

"It's messed up. Its fur is all matted and filthy. It's got all that dirt stuck to it." Marnie said, pointing at the dog. "Leaves. Sticks and

mud and leaves."

"Like it came from a graveyard!"

"Nooooo!" Marnie shouted.

I could see her legs trembling. She pressed her back against the garage wall. The dog's tail stood straight out. The frightening creature made a snuffling sound as it moved closer. One slow step at a time.

"Maybe we can make a run for it." I whispered, motioning for the door.

"I... don't think so. It's so big. How could we get around it? It... it's not a real dog, right? It's... back from the dead."

It's the Blue Kerlew Hound. It's here. And you know what it came for. It came to take back its tooth!"

"Andy. It looks so angry. What is it going to do to us?" Marnie whispered, grabbing my hand. Her hand felt cold as ice.

"I don't know." I answered. The big dog took another lumbering step toward us. It hunkered in the middle of the garage now, blocking our way to the door.

"We can call for help. If we shout, your parents-"

"They're not home."

She uttered another cry. Her chin was trembling. She had her arms crossed tightly in front of her, like a shield. I stared down at the dirt and dead leaves clinging to the creature's blue fur. I took a step forward. I lowered my head toward it.

"Don't look at me." I said to the dog before pointing to Marnie. "It's HER tooth!"

"Andy... what are you doing?" Marnie cried. But I ignored her.

"It's Marnie's tooth. She bought it. She bought it at the theme park, and she's been wearing it ever since." The dog raised its wet eyes to Marnie and uttered a low, menacing growl. "Give it to him, Marnie! Quick! Give him the tooth! Or else he'll tear you to pieces! Like the sorcerer!"

"Noooo!" Marnie wailed. She tugged at the tooth and struggled to pull the cord off her neck. The cord caught in her hair. Finally, she jerked it loose. Then she jammed the tooth into my hand.

"It's Andy's! It's not mine! It's his! I-I stole it from him!" Marnie shouted. The old hound gazed up at her without moving. "I stole it from him! Andy is the one who bought it. It's his. REALLY!"

A heavy silence fell over the garage. And then, I couldn't hold it in any longer. I burst out laughing.

"I KNEW it! I knew you were a thief, Marnie!" I shouted. Her mouth dropped open. Her eyes bulged.

"Andy? Why are you laughing? Th-that dog-" She struggled to get out.

"You're busted, Marnie. I totally got you! That dog isn't the Blue Kerlew Hound. That's Jack, my new neighbor's dog."

"You... you planned this? You did this to scare me?" Marnie asked, dumbfounded.

"To scare the truth out of you."

Well... you really got me. I was a little scared."

"A little scared?" I laughed again. I was totally enjoying myself. Talk about a plan working perfectly!

"That dog?"

"It's the dog that's been keeping me up for nights. At first, I honestly thought it was the Blue Kerlew Hound since we hadn't had dogs howling for a long time around here. But then I realized it was my new neighbor's dog, Jack. Jack isn't used to this neighborhood. So he howls at night. I went to see the new neighbor. Mr. Murphy. He said he was sorry about the hound dog howling every night. But when I saw the dog, it gave me the idea."

"To scare me?"

"To spray it blue and scare you And to get you to admit you stole my wishing tooth."

"I admit it." Marnie said, blushing. "Okay? Happy? I admit it."

"You're totally blushing. You're actually embarrassed, aren't you!"

"Yes. I'm embarrassed. It was crazy. Stealing that tooth necklace while

you were out cold. Then saying it was mine all along." Marnie said before averting her gaze. "I think I lost my mind. I'm sorry, Andy. Really. You must hate me. I'm so sorry."

"Good boy," I said, still reeling from my plan working. But then I stopped. The Blue Kerlew Hound took a step closer. The creature made a snuffling sound. Slowly, slowly, it raised its head.

And ...

And ...

And... a shock of horror made my whole body jerk.

"Hey!" I shouted, my blood running cold. "Hey! Wait! What's going on here? That's the WRONG DOG!"

"Wrong dog?" Marnie asked. "Andy, what are you talking about?"

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't move. I Couldn't speak! I kept my eyes on the growling hound. Not Jack. Definitely not Jack. I knew what I was staring at. But how could it be? How could I be staring at the real Blue Kerlew Hound?

"I-I borrowed Mr. Murphy's hound dog." I stammered. "I sprayed him blue. I stuck twigs and mud on him. But... but... "

Suddenly, another dog slunk into view at the garage door. Smaller. Cleaner. It was Jack, looking forlorn. His head down. His whole body was

quivering.

"Who's that other dog?" Marnie asked.

"Th-that's Jack." I answered, my voice trembling. "That's the dog I borrowed. He's too frightened to come in. Look. He's totally scared... scared of the Blue Kerlew Hound. He knows this dog is evil."

Jack whimpered and hurried out of sight. The Blue Kerlew Hound bared its ugly, jagged teeth and snarled at us.

"This-this is all your fault."

"MY fault? YOU'RE the one who kept making all the wishes. I warned you that each wish brought the hound closer. But you didn't believe me." I shouted. Marnie didn't reply as she knew I had her there.

White froth bubbled out of the evil dog's open mouth. It lowered its head, preparing to attack. I pressed my back against the garage wall.

"What are we going to do?" Marnie asked, shuddering.

I stared down at the dirt and dead leaves clinging to the creature's blue fur. From the graveyard... From the grave... The dog tensed its back, preparing to leap at us.

"Give it to him, Marnie!" I shouted. "Quick! Give him the tooth! That's what he came for! Give him the tooth, or else he'll tear us to pieces!"

"Andy! YOU have it!" She cried. "The tooth! You're squeezing it in your hand!"

I was so terrified I didn't even feel it. An ugly roar escaped the dog's throat. He turned on me. His dark eyes suddenly glowed bright RED! He bent his back legs, preparing to leap. I squeezed the tooth in my hand and shouted at the top of my lungs.

"I WISH FOR THE HOUND TO DISAPPEAR!"

Nothing happened.

I squeezed the tooth so hard it dug into my palm. I held my breath and stared at the growling beast. I shouted the wish again.

"I wish for the hound to disappear!"

Nothing happened.

The evil hound stared up at us. The wishes made on his tooth didn't work on him. The dog reared back, kicked off from the garage floor, and attacked. It leaped onto me, snarling and growling. I felt its putrid breath on my face. Then I felt its heavy paws wrap around my waist. So powerful. The dog heaved its weight against me, and I slammed hard against the wall.

I couldn't move. It had me pinned against the concrete. White slobber poured from its mouth as it opened its jaws - and slashed its deadly teeth at my face. I struggled to break free. But the huge hound had me trapped. It pressed its enormous paws down on me. The dog smelled like rotting meat. I could feel its hot drool as its gaping mouth prepared to close, to clamp its powerful fangs down on me. I still had the tooth wrapped in my hand.

'If I can't make HIM disappear, maybe I can make us disappear!' I thought. "I-I wish Marnie and I were invisible!"

Would this wish work?

Yes!

I knew the wish had been granted when the hound released a surprise yelp. The dog dropped to the floor. His red eyes swept rapidly from right to left, searching for us. I turned around and couldn't see Marnie beside me. We were both invisible!

"Run!" I screamed. "To the house! He can't see us!"

The dog uttered a puzzled whine. I took off, running hard. I hoped Marnie was running beside me. My heart pounded as I ran full speed down the

driveway to the kitchen door. Would we be safe inside the house? I glanced back. The dog had started trotting toward the house. Did he figure out where we were? Could he hear us? Gasping for breath, I leaped onto the back stoop.

'Got to get inside! Got to get inside!' I thought.

I grasped the handle to the back door and... and my hand went right THROUGH IT!

"Huh?"

I grabbed for the door handle again. No. I couldn't feel it. My fingers went right through it. I grabbed at it again. Again. I couldn't touch anything. I couldn't move anything! This is not what I thought would happen if you were invisible.

"Andy! Hurry!" Marnie cried, right behind me on the stoop. "The dog smells us. He's coming for us! Hurry! Open the door!"

"I-I can't!" I shouted. "My hand is going right through the handle! We're trapped out here! We can't get inside!"

"Look out! Here he COMES!"

Sniffing the air, the hound came running toward the back stoop. I didn't think. I just moved. I leaned my shoulder against the kitchen door and pushed. And I slipped right through the wooden door. Startled, I stumbled halfway across the kitchen.

"Marnie!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Go through the door! You can dive right through the door!"

"Why are you screaming?" She asked, slightly annoyed. "I'm standing right next to you."

I took in a deep, shuddering breath. My heart pounded so hard that I felt dizzy. I tried to lean against the kitchen counter. But I couldn't feel it. I sank halfway through it.

"Did you hear that growl?" Marnie asked. I didn't have to see her to know how terrified she was. "It's out there, Andy. And it knows we're in here."

"Do you think the hound can go through a solid door, too?"

"M-maybe."

"It's a ghost, right? It can probably go through anything."

"What are we going to do?" I asked, my voice no louder than a whisper.

Silence.

We were both thinking hard. From the backyard, I heard another low, menacing growl. I crossed the kitchen to the back window and peered out. The blue hound sat in the driveway, sniffing the air.

"It's waiting for us to come out." I said. "We're trapped in here."

"Maybe we can call for help." Marnie said. "Call your parents. Or my parents. Maybe if someone else comes, the dog won't want to show itself ... "

"...and it will run away. Maybe. It's a plan, I guess." Outside, the dog let out a long, angry howl. I stepped up to the wall phone next to the kitchen table. "My dad has his cell. I'll try him first."

But as I reached for the phone, I remembered our other problem.

"Oh, nooooo!

I grabbed at it again. But I got the same result.

"No. This isn't happening."

"You can't pick it up?" Marnie asked.

"My hand goes right through it."

"How could I forget? This is so weird. We can't touch or pick up anything. No way we can call for help."

"Well, then make us visible again so we can call for help. Hurry before that dog gets restless and comes charging in here."

"Yes. I'll make a wish. The tooth. I -" A wave of panic rolled over me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see straight!

"Andy - what's wrong?"

"The tooth. I don't have it. It must have fallen from my hand when I turned invisible."

A long silence.

"You really don't have it?" Marnie whispered.

"It-it must have fallen to the garage floor. It's .. . in the garage!"

"Well, you have to go get it! Go! Hurry!"

"Me? Why do I have to do it?"

"It's your tooth!"

"HA!" I exclaimed. "Nice how you remember whose tooth it is when you want me to risk my LIFE!"

"I'm sorry." Marnie said. "Sorry, I acted like such a jerk. But you have to go get the tooth, Andy. If you don't, we'll be invisible forever!"

I took a few trembling steps to the kitchen door. The hound can't see me, I told myself. But I have to walk right past him to get into the garage.

"Just run." Marnie said. "Run right past him. You can do it, Andy. You have to!"

My legs were shaking so hard I could barely walk. I took another deep breath, pushed myself through the kitchen door, and onto the back stoop. As soon as I burst outside, the dog raised its head and climbed to its feet. It was alert, VERY ALERT! It opened its jaws and let out a fierce growl. Then it lowered its head menacingly and came trotting toward me, growling all the way.

'It can't see me. The dog can't see me.'

I kept repeating those words to myself over and over. I stepped off the stoop. Moving silently and carefully, I made my way across the grass toward the garage.

'Don't make a sound. Don't make a sound. The dog can't see you.'

The dog stopped suddenly. It was only a few feet from me now. I could smell it, smell the foul aroma of the graveyard on its fur. And I

knew it could smell me, too. It raised its head and sniffed the air again before staring STRAIGHT AT ME!

'It can't see me. It can't see me.'

I took off running. I lowered my head and shoulders and rocketed toward the garage. My invisible sneakers didn't make a sound as I stormed up the driveway and into the shadows of the garage.

I glanced back.

The dog had turned. Its head was lowered again, and it was trotting in my direction. I let out a gasp. Was I going to be trapped in the garage with the evil hound? Squinting into the dim light of the garage, I saw the tooth on the concrete floor.

I dove for it!

I could hear the dog pick up its steps behind me. It knew where I was. I grabbed the tooth. My hand went right through it.

"Oh, noooo!"

I tried to pinch it between my thumb and pointer finger. But I couldn't touch it. I couldn't pick up the tooth. I heard a raging snarl. The dog thundered into the garage. It bared its long fangs. White drool dripped from his mouth. The hound knew it had me... had me trapped.

My legs were shaking too hard to hold me. I dropped to my knees. My knee landed on the tooth. I couldn't feel it. But maybe if I was covering it... maybe ...

"I wish Marnie and I were visible again!" I screamed.

Startled by my cry, the hound stopped. And, yes! Yes! There I was! I saw my legs ... my knees. I saw my arms. I shook my hands rapidly in the air.

I was back!

"Uh-Oh!"

Back in time to be torn to pieces by the furious ghost dog!

"No!" I picked up the tooth before jumping to my feet. "I know why you came back! You came back for this. The sorcerer didn't return it. And so you tore him apart. But I'm going to return it. I'm giving you back your tooth!"

I pulled my arm back and heaved the tooth as hard as I could. I watched it sail out of the garage and over the driveway. The tooth and its cord flew to the front, nearly to the street. For a moment, I felt slightly annoyed and irritated that I never got to use the tooth for wishes outside of testing it the first time. But I knew getting rid of it was for the best.

"Go get it!" I shouted to the dog. "It's all yours!"

With a final growl, the dog spun away from me. It lowered its head and raced down the driveway to get its prize. I hunched over with my hands on my knees and struggled to catch my breath. When I looked up, I saw Marnie poke her head out the kitchen door.

"Is it gone?" She asked. "Andy, we're visible again! Did you wish that dog away? Is it really gone?"

"I ... gave it back the tooth," I choked out while nodding. I gazed down the driveway. I didn't see the hound. "I think it's gone. I think it's gone for good!"

Marnie and I both cheered. Marnie hurried over to me. We cheered again, did a victory dance, and touched knuckles. Then I gasped. A blue dog walked out slowly from the side of the garage. It took me a few seconds to remember it was Jack. Poor, frightened Jack.

"It's okay, Jack. That bad dog is gone." I said, walking over to him. I heard a shout. I turned and saw a man jogging up the driveway.

"Mr. Murphy!" I shouted. "You're back!"

"How's it going?" Mr. Murphey asked, jogging up to us. "How is my buddy Jack?"

"He's right there. Thanks for letting him visit." I said, pointing to him. Mr. Murphy took a few steps toward the hound. Then he stopped. His mouth dropped open. He turned to me. "What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong." He answered. "This isn't my dog!"

A shock of fear made my heart skip a beat.

"Oh, no!" I gasped. Did the wrong dog run away? Is the evil ghost dog standing here?

"This can't be my dog! My dog is brown. This dog is BLUE!" Mr. Murphy laughed as he wrapped his arms around the dog's neck. It licked his face. I let out a long sigh of relief. Mr. Murphy was joking. The dog was Jack, after all.

"I-I can explain." I stammered.

"We were making a video for school." Marnie interjected. "About a weird dog."

"I sprayed him blue, Mr. Murphy." I quickly added. "It will come right out. Marnie and I will give him a bath. Then we'll bring him home to you."

"You turned Jack blue? What kind of video were you making?" Mr. Murphy asked, scratching his head. "A horror video?"

"Uh ... yes. A very realistic horror video."

Marnie and I pulled a big metal tub from the garage. We plopped Jack inside it with lots of sudsy water. I used the garden hose to spray the blue color off his fur. Once we finished, Marnie said goodbye and headed for home. I dried Jack off and returned him to Mr. Murphy. I walked home with a big smile on my face. Now, life would return to normal. I had decided I love normal!

Late that night, I lay in bed, still awake. I guess it was hard to calm down after such a terrifying day. I was just closing my eyes when I heard the first dog howl. I sat straight up in bed. A gasp escaped my throat. Another long howl. So nearby. Like right outside my window. I scolded myself for getting scared. That had to be Jack. Jack across the street, up to his old tricks. I heard another low howl. And then my phone rang.

So late at night?

"Hello? Marnie?" I said after answering. "What's up? What's the problem?"

"Well..." She hesitated. "Andy, I have a confession to make."

Outside, the dog howls sounded angry. They sent shivers down my spine as goosebumps formed on my skin.

"Confession?" I asked. "Marnie, what are you talking about?"

"I... uh... I found the tooth in the driveway. Don't kill me, okay?"

"You what?!"

"I found the tooth. I... couldn't resist it. I took it back."

"You mean the Blue Kerlew Hound didn't get its tooth?" I weakly said, suddenly very cold.

"I guess not. I'm wearing the tooth. But I promise I'll share, Andy. This time, I'll share." I ignored her and silently hung up.

How could I sleep? I sat straight up in bed, listening to the dog howl outside. The clock said it was two in the morning. But I was wide awake. Suddenly, I saw a bright green-yellow glow on the wall in front of me. It was coming from the top of my bookshelf.

"Huh?"

Was I dreaming again? Going crazy? Blinking into the shimmering light, I made my way across the room. I stared at the little creature. The toy that the shopkeeper at the theme park had attached to my souvenir package. The green-yellow glow flared all around it. I remembered what the old guy said. Jonathan Chiller. I remember he put the tooth in a box and wrapped the box in a ribbon before attaching the little creature to the ribbon.

And then he said: "Take a little creature home with you."

And now the creature was suddenly glowing on my bookshelf. It was glowing like a candle. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I was drawn to it.

I felt pulled... pulled into its gleaming light.

All of a sudden, I was surrounded by the shimmering green-yellow flames. They swept around me, lifting me from my room.

Pulling me ... pulling me into their strange fire.

"No!" I shouted. I instantly realized I was no longer at home. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw shelf after shelf of weird objects, gifts, and souvenirs. I was back in the little shop.

Back in Chiller House!

And Jonathan Chiller stood in front of me with a grin on his face. Not a friendly grin. It was somehow cold and menacing.

"H-how did I get back here?" I choked out. He didn't answer my question. Instead, he pushed the little square spectacles back on his pointed nose.

"Welcome back, Andy." Chiller said.

"But why? Why am I here?"

"It's payback time." Chiller answered in an unsettling tone. "Time to pay for your gift."

"Excuse me?"

"Time for you to pay me back for all the fun you've had with your wishing tooth."

"But-but-" I sputtered. "I didn't have any fun!"

"Don't worry, Andy." Chiller said, his smile tightening against his pale face. "The fun is just beginning! MY kind of fun!"

Real World

"As Chiller laughed, Andy wondered how his luck had gotten this bad. And the last thing he heard before everything went black was the familiar laughter of Murder the Clown. The End. For now." Jaune said as he closed the book.

"Wow. So even after all that happened, Marnie still went back for the tooth." Yang said.

"Well, greed is a powerful thing. As I recall reading at one point: There is no calamity greater than lavish desires. And the tooth granted it." Jaune said, closing the book.

"That is true. Greed can compel people to do things many others would find immoral or dangerous." Weiss said.

"So, what happened to Andy and Marnie?" Coco asked.

"Andy's story is not yet finished. I'll tell you that story another time. But for Marnie, she died. The Ghost Dog came for her; she

panicked, wished herself away, lost the tooth, and ended up in a prison she could not escape from." Jaune answered.

"Wow. Hopefully, it was a painless death." Ren said.

"You could say that."

"But speaking of the tooth and Ghost Dog, what should we do about *OUR* current situation?" Yatsuhashi asked. Turning back to the Ghost Dog, they saw that it was staring at them with great intensity.

"I-I don't know. I want to say the Ghost Dog only wants its tooth back. But now I'm not sure. It wanted me to finish the story. Not to mention, we don't have the tooth." Jaune answered.

BARK! BARK! BARK!

"ZWEI!" Ruby shouted as Zwei ran with something in his mouth to stand between the teens and the Ghost Dog. But before anyone could say anything, Zwei spat out whatever was in his mouth. And what they saw shocked them.

"THE TOOTH!" They shouted with the Ghost Dog growling.

"QUICK! GET RID OF IT!" Nora shouted as the Ghost Dog moved closer, with its eyes turning red.

"NO! USE IT TO GET US OUT OF HERE! THEN WE CAN WISH IT BACK TO THE GHOST DOG!" Coco shouted.

"Wait. I have a better idea." Ruby said.

"What are you doing, Ruby?" Yang asked as Ruby held her hands up while slowly inching forward to the tooth.

"You'll see." Ruby said as she picked up the tooth. The Ghost Dog loudly growled but quieted down when Ruby approached him. "You want your tooth back, right? You like having all your teeth. But the mean old sorcerer and Chiller kept it from you for a long time, right?"

"Careful, Ruby." Yatsuhashi said as the Ghost Dog nodded its head yet still growled.

"But you keep losing it somehow. I'm not sure if it's because you're a ghost or something else is doing it. But let me help you put it back in your mouth." Ruby said, holding out the tooth.

The Ghost Dog seemed surprised by the offer, but it seemed to accept it nonetheless. It opened its mouth to reveal its sharp teeth but, more importantly, the spot where the tooth belonged. Steeling her nerves, Ruby approached the Ghost Dog and kneeled beside its mouth. Adjusting her grip, she inserted the tooth into the spot. And to her surprise, it went in without any trouble. Ruby then stood up and moved back to give the Ghost Dog some space. It opened and closed its mouth a few times before licking its teeth. The Ghost Dog seemed happy that it finally got its tooth back.

AAWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! The Ghost Dog howled.

AAWWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOO! Zwei howled.

"Well, it seems happy now." Weiss said.

"Yeah." Blake agreed before realizing something. "Hey. The rain stopped."

"And the lights came back on." Velvet said, relieved, as the lights came back on.

"While that's nice... what now?" Pyrrha asked, curious.

"I have no idea." Jaune answered as the tension and dread in the room dissipated. However, the Ghost Dog remained in the room.

"Uh. Do you... are you... still needing something else?" Ren asked the Ghost Dog. Instead of answering, the Ghost Dog's mouth began to glow. Everyone was worried about what would happen but

became confused when a paper with writing on it appeared in Ruby's hand.

"Uh."

"What does it say?" Weiss asked.

"I'm not sure. I can't read it. It just has strange red symbols on it." Ruby answered.

"Let me see." Pyrrha said, grabbing the paper. "Oh. It says that in exchange for giving the Ghost Dog its tooth back and putting it in its mouth instead of doing what others have done, it is willing to give you a wish of your choice, Ruby."

"Wait. How did you know how to-" Jaune began but went silent when the Ghost Dog growled.

"Any wish I want?" Ruby asked, earning a nod from the Ghost Dog.

"Careful, Ruby." Yang said as Ruby thought about her wish.

"I got it. I wish my mother and Yang's stepmother, Summer Rose, were alive again." Nodding, the Ghost Dog's mouth glowed a bright white that nearly blinded everyone. After a moment, it died down. However, to everyone's confusion, Summer Rose wasn't there. Even the Ghost Dog seemed confused by this. "Did it work?"

"I don't see her." Yang added.

"Hey. The symbols on the paper changed." Pyrrha said.

"What do they say now?" Nora asked.

"It says that the Ghost Dog is not sure what happened or why it didn't work. It then asks you to try again, but make it so that you are wishing for Summer Rose to be here with us and that she is in good health."

"Alright. I wish that my mother and Yang's stepmother, Summer Rose, was here with us and is in perfect health." Ruby said.

The same thing from before happened, where the Ghost Dog's teeth glowed and nearly blinded everyone. But unlike the previous time, when the light died down, they saw Summer Rose standing there. She seemed slightly out of it and confused but was otherwise fine. Yet, that changed when Summer spotted Yang and Ruby. Granted, the confusion still remained when she realized they were teens and not little kids.

"Yang. Ruby. Are you two really here?" Summer asked, sounding hopeful.

"MOM!" Yang and Ruby shouted before running up to hug their mother/stepmother.

"Well, this is a lovely moment." Weiss said as they watched the scene unfold while the Ghost Dog moved to sit next to Jaune.

"Yeah." The others agreed.

"We missed you so much." Yang and Ruby said, tears in their eyes.

"I missed you both so much as well. I spent every day in that cursed Camp of Lost Legends, wishing I could be with my family again. I-I don't know how I am back here. But it doesn't matter. Now I get to make up for all the time that I lost." Summer said, tears streaming down her face. But she let out a laugh when Zwei came up to her. "And I missed you as well, Zwei."

'Wait. She was in the Camp of the Lost Legends?! That would make a lot of sense. But what's going to happen now since someone must always be there.' Jaune wondered.

"As nice as this moment is, I have to ask." Coco said, turning to Pyrrha. "How do you know how to read those strange symbols?"

"Yeah. I have never seen those symbols before. I don't recall seeing them in any historical book or records of language books." Weiss added.

"Oh. Um." Pyrrha nervously began while scratching the back of her head. However, before she could continue or the others asked any other question, the lights suddenly went out again, with the rain resuming. *'Oh, thank Oum for that.'*

"Wow. Talk about timing." Ren said.

"But why did the Ghost Dog cause the lights to go out and rain to come back?" Velvet asked, curious. They all turned to the Ghost Dog and saw it shake its head as if to say it didn't do it.

"Then what caused it? Or was it natural?' Blake asked.

"Wait. Why is the Blue Kerlew Hound here?" Summer asked, curious.

"It's a long story. But we would also like to know how you know about the Blue Kerlew Hound." Jaune said.

"Same as you. It's a long story."

"We can discuss it later. Right now, let's-" Ren said.

BAM

"Wow. That lightning sounded too close." Nora said as lightning started striking every few seconds.

"Yeah." Velvet said. However, everyone tensed up again when they heard someone pounding on the front door. Even the Ghost Dog seemed on edge as it started growling at the door and whoever/whatever was behind it.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

"Who could that be?" Blake asked, worried.

"I-I'll go see." Jaune said.

"Careful, Jaune." Velvet said.

Nodding, Jaune slowly moved toward the front door. And with each step, the sound of lightning cracking seemed to grow louder and more frequent. Soon, he was only a few feet from the door. However, before he could force himself the rest of the way, the door suddenly flew open all the way to reveal a figure standing there. Yet, for some reason, nobody could make out who it was since it was so dark. Moreover, even when lighting lit up the place briefly, the figure remained shrouded in darkness that nobody could make any detail out.

"Who are you?" Yatsuhashi asked. The figure didn't answer or even move. But after a second, it finally responded.

"Salutations everyone."

Notes:

Was tying a new way to get this chapter done since the old way was shut down. So it took a bit longer to get this chapter out.

Rereading this story made me remember why I liked When the Ghost Dog Howls and why Marnie was my least favorite character in the entire Goosebumps series.

Also, I made some slight changes (Such as changing Horrorland to Theme Park) because Jaune wants to keep it a secret for now and Horrorland will play a bigger part down the road.

The Next Chapter will feature Penny and Shocker on Shock Steet.

Updated List of characters and their potential stories

Doctor Oobleck: The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb and Return of the Mummy

Professor Peach: Stay Out of the Basement

Professor Port: How to Kill a Monster

Glynda: The Ghost Next Door

Cinder: Honor of meeting Slappy

Ozpin: A Night in Terror Tower

Blake: Cry of the Cat

Ruby: The Haunted Mask

Yang: The Haunted School

Weiss: The Abominable Snowman of Pasadena

Nora & Ren: The Scarecrow Walks at Midnight

Pyrrha: Vampire Breath

Velvet: Bad Hare Day

Yatsuhashi: Monster Blood

Yatsuhashi, Ciel, and Ace Operatives: All The Monster Blood Sequels

Coco: The Curse of Camp Cold Lake

Fox: The Horror of Camp Jelly Jam

Qrow: It Came from Beneath the Sink

Raven: The Horrors of the Black Ring.

Summer: Legend of the Lost Legend

Winter: 12 Screams of Christmas

Some/most of these stories will be about their past experiences and how they tell Jaune about it. Not all of them are 100% certain yet. As for Pyrrha's story: It's based on how we never see her father or other family members. And supposedly, the one who visited Pyrrha's statue at night was her mother. And the reason no one sees them is because they are vampires and can only come out at night. And Pyrrha received something that allowed her to live her life like a normal person (Being able to go out during the daytime and not needing blood as substance).

Chapter 11

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 11: A Shocker on Shock Street

"Oh, Oum, Penny. You scared the crap out of me." Jaune said, smiling, as he tried to calm his racing heart down.

"How have I scared the crap out of you, Jaune? Did I accidentally cause you to have a bowel movement?" Penny asked, confused and curious. And even though everyone was still on edge, they all calmed down and chuckled at what Penny said. Even the Ghost Dog calmed down and decided to lie down and see how all this played out. However, it became curious when Zwei decided to lie down facing him.

"No. It was just an expression. It just meant that you scared me a lot." Jaune explained as Velvet helped him up.

"Jaune. Who is this?" Velvet asked, curious. But before he could answer, Ruby did.

"PENNY!" Ruby shouted before dashing over to Penny and hugging her.

"Salutations, friend Ruby." Penny said, returning the hug. But as Ruby expected, it was much tighter than it was supposed to be.

"Penny. Air." Ruby wheezed.

"Oops. Sorry, friend Ruby." Penny said as she let go of Ruby.

"Uh..." Coco began.

"Can someone fill us in on what's happening?" Yang asked, staring Penny down hard. She didn't know why, but she felt her big sister

instincts kick in. Moreover, Yang didn't know if it was to protect Ruby or to tease her. But considering how close Ruby stood to Penny, she felt like it was the second option.

"And where are we?" Summer added. Yet, she smiled at the scene as she could tell her little reaper liked the new visitor.

"Right. This is Penny Poldenina. A good friend-" Jaune began.

"-A good friend of Friend Ruby and Friend Jaune." Penny interjected.

"Yes." Ruby chuckled while Jaune smiled. "Although, I am curious about how you know Penny, Jaune."

"I'll answer that in a moment." Jaune answered before turning to Summer. "As for... um... Sorry. What was your name again?"

"Summer Rose." Summer answered. "But you can just call me Summer."

"Okay, Summer. But to answer you're question. We are currently in Vale in the town of Ga-Metru. But more specifically, we are on-"

"Shocker Street." Two new voices answered. Startled, everyone turned to the door and saw two other people standing there. One was a short female with a round face, short black hair, and blue eyes. The other was a short male with a round face, short black hair, and blue eyes.

"Okay. I'm getting tired of asking this. But who are you two?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Oh. Hey, Erin. Hey, Marty. Long time no see." Jaune said, smiling at his two other *unique* friends.

"Hey, Jaune." Marty said as he and Jaune shook hands.

"It's been too long." Erin said, pulling Jaune into a brief hug.

"Far too long. Even though it's only been two years." Jaune chuckled.

"Uh. Jaune." Ren said, getting his attention.

"Yes, Ren?"

"Can you please keep us all informed and even answer Summer Rose's question?"

"Yeah. We have no idea what's going on." Nora said.

"And while we don't mind a surprise here and there. We had enough to last a lifetime these past few days." Blake began.

"We don't need anymore, especially surprised that could endanger our lives like the Ghost Dog here. No offense." Weiss finished before quickly adding when the Ghost Dog looked at her. However, instead of growling, it smirked at her, almost as if it liked having others fear it.

"Is this the legendary Ghost Dog that lost its magical tooth and has been searching for it for hundreds of years?" Penny gasped.

"Yes. But-WAIT! DON'T GO NEAR IT!" Jaune began before shouting when Penny approached the Ghost Dog and somehow started petting it. Everyone was rightfully confused, especially the Ghost Dog. Yet, after a moment, it seemed to have sensed no evil coming from Penny and started to enjoy the affection she was giving it. However, everyone was still ready to save Penny in case the Ghost Dog decided to attack. But it seemed like that might not be the case.

"Well, um, you better get used to surprises since you're on Shock Street." Marty said before pointing to Penny. "Kind of like that."

"Don't worry, though. Unlike the Ghost Dog and some others, most creatures here are friendly." Erin assured.

"Are there any undead creatures, creatures of the night, or anything like that around here?" Pyrrha asked, confusing everyone.

"Um. Yeah. There are a few. There are three vampires and, I think, a wolfman living nearby." Erin answered. "But again, they are pretty friendly unless provoked."

"Alright."

"Anyway." Jaune said, mentally noting to ask Pyrrha why she asked that later. "Why are you guys here?"

"We noticed that it started raining despite the forecast saying there would be no rain until next week at least. And at least a month before any storms strong enough to knock out power would reach here. So when some houses suddenly lost power, we decided to check it out, see if anyone needed our help, and see what was causing it. Thankfully, everyone was okay." Marty answered.

"But then the rain stopped and started only on this house. So, we decided to check it out. And we're glad we did since the Ghost Dog is here." Erin added.

"Well, we did have a scare from the Ghost Dog. But we're alright now." Velvet said. "But out of curiosity, how many know about the Ghost Dog?"

"A lot of people and creatures know about the legend of the Ghost Dog and the story behind it.

"It's just that not many want to ever meet it face to face." Marty added.

"True. Not many would want to meet with a Ghost Dog face-to-face, especially with one that can perform wishes." Coco said.

"Anyway. We're all fine now. None of us are hurt. And I don't think the Ghost Dog will hurt us since he finally got his tooth back." Jaune said with the Ghost Dog showing its teeth to emphasize the point. Although, it struggled to do so since Penny was still petting it somehow.

"That's good. I would hate for anything to happen to my friends and their friends." Penny said, finally stopping and moving to stand next to Ruby.

"Thanks, Penny." Ruby said.

"But now that's out of the way. Can someone please tell us what's going on?" Yang asked, annoyed.

"And how you guys are not freaking out about a Ghost Dog or other creatures living here." Weiss added.

"And how you four know each other." Velvet added.

"Alright. But let's get comfy since this is also a bit of a story." Jaune said.

Ten Minutes Later

"Okay. So how do you four know each other?" Summer asked, smiling, as Ruby and Penny sat near each other. But they missed it as they watched Zwei try to play with the Ghost Dog, who seemed like it just wanted to be left alone so he could rest.

"I was thirteen at the time. We had just returned from a... vacation." Jaune began. "But because of problems with the bullhead, we had to land here. Luckily, my family already owned this house, so we didn't have to rent a hotel or motel room. But on the second day here, I decided to explore a bit and..."

"And we met after he fell for one of my pranks." Marty interjected, laughing, with Erin joining in a second later.

"Yeah. Marty got me good. Anyway, after shaking off the dust... and feathers, we got to know each other, hung out, and got along really well, although I was weirded out and confused by some of the looks and why others acted how they did. But it was on the third day that I discovered the reason why. And it was that Shocker Street was full of

monsters living there. But surprisingly, Shocker Street started out as a theme park based on a not-so-well-known horror franchise called Shock Street."

"Really?" Velvet asked, surprised.

"Yup."

"Fox is asked if the franchise is still active?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Nope. It went under a few months before the theme park was torn down." Marty answered.

"And that's because the creators died. And since it wasn't that popular or well-known, no other company wanted to pick it up. So, it just faded into obscurity." Erin added.

"Okay. That explains how you three know each other. But how long have you two been here?" Ren asked.

"And where are your parents?" Summer asked, becoming worried when Erin, Jaune, and Marty slightly tensed up.

"Um. That kind of goes with their story and how Shocker Street came about." Jaune answered.

"And it's quite complicated and confusing." Marty added.

"How so?" Summer asked.

"Well. Technically, we have *A PARENT* , but that is a bit of a stretch." Erin said.

"Okay. That is not vague at all." Weiss said.

"Yeah." Erin said before turning to Jaune. "Do you think we could show them?"

"Yes. You can show them." Jaune answered.

"Show us what, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"This." Marty answered as he and Erin stood and did something they were not expecting. They pulled up their shirts to reveal their stomachs before grabbing their sides and pulling to show that the front was really a hatch cover. And underneath were hundreds of wires and panels.

"YOU TWO ARE ROBOTS!?" Everyone shouted, shocked.

"Yup." Erin said as they closed the hatch before adjusting their shirts and sitting back down.

"They are robots." Jaune said. "Well, androids, to be precise."

"So that's why you said it was complicated." Blake said.

"Yeah. We were created, not born." Erin said.

"So, did your creator program you two to act like normal kids?" Coco asked.

"Uh. That's also... complicated." Marty answered.

"But to be frank, we don't... really know. Our creator initially made us test the Shock Street rides to see how kids would like it. But along the way, we somehow started making our own memories, even though they were not real or accurate, like having a mother. Then it just snowballed from there." Erin added.

"We basically became our own person. And by that, we mean we started acting like we were alive this whole time."

"Well, you guys are, technically. But to keep it simple, Marty and Erin somehow gained sentience and eventually became living, despite being robots still." Jaune said. "And all this without having aura."

"What do you mean by not having aura, Jaune?" Pyrrha asked, curious.

"Penny and I met here a year later. Her father was taking her on a vacation and decided here was a good place for some bonding time. We met a few days later and became fast friends. And I discovered that she is an android created by her father, who gave her life by somehow giving her a part of his aura."

"Is that true?" Ren asked.

"Yup. My father created me and gave me part of his aura. And I met Friend Jaune here when he was fourteen." Penny answered.

"Did you know about this, Ruby?" Yang asked.

"That Penny was an android." Summer added.

"Yup. I knew that Penny was a android for a while." Ruby answered. However, she blushed when Yang and Summer threw her knowing looks.

"But on the topic of robots/androids." Yatsuhashi began. "What happened to your creator?"

"And the rides." Nora asked.

"And what about the others who knew you two were robots? And those who helped with making and maintaining the theme park." Weiss added.

"We don't really know. He tried to fix us. And by fixing us, we mean he tried to make us emotionless robots again. But he failed. However, he didn't give up. He then went away to try and find something but never returned." Erin answered.

"We think he ended up in..." Marty began but slowed down when he saw Jaune shaking his head. Luckily, no one else caught it. "... a junkyard where he died somehow."

"A junkyard?" Blake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Because we were just meant to test the rides, they only shelled out lien for decent parts when we were being made. But if anything breaks, they just use cheap replacements. And the junkyard just so happens to be one where he gets most of our parts." Erin half-lied. While they did lie about where he ended up, they weren't lying about how he used cheap junkyard parts to fix them.

"Are you still... how do I say this?" Summer began. "Are you still..."

"Using those junk parts." Marty finished.

"Yes. Are you still using the cheap replacements?"

"For a while, we did. However, after Penny and her father arrived, that changed."

"How so?" Weiss asked.

"Long story short, after we finished hanging out, we got damaged and needed some repairs. Pietro saw this, realized we were robots, and immediately fixed us up and gave us upgrades to boot. So, now we are more durable and don't have to worry about getting as damaged as easily." Erin explained.

"That was nice of him."

"It was." Marty said.

"But what about the others and rides?" Yang asked.

"They left since, without our creator, there was no one to sign their checks. The park soon fell into disarray and was abandoned shortly after. Then they used the scrap and material to build more homes on Shock Street, making it what it is now."

"But if you are talking about the monsters, well. They became sentient like us. And they live peacefully here as well." Erin added.

"So we don't have to worry about them attacking?" Coco asked.

"Nope. They are friendly as long as you don't provoke them." Marty answered.

"That's good."

"It is, despite not many people coming here." Erin said as she and Marty stood up. "Anyway. Now that everything has settled down and everyone is alright. Are you all going to stay or leave?"

"What time is it?" Ruby asked.

"It is currently 23:50." Penny answered.

"Huh?"

"11:50 at night." Weiss explained.

"Oh."

"Which means that even if the bullheads were operational, they would be closed for the night with only emergency bullheads operational. Great."

"What do you mean if they were operational?" Marty asked. However, instead of answering, everyone, minus Summer, pointed to the Ghost Dog, who seemed to smirk in his own way.

"Right." Erin and Marty said.

"Would it be okay if we stay the night here, Arc?" Coco asked.

"Of course. Although, some might have to share the beds or sleep on the couch." Jaune answered, missing the blush that formed on Velvet's face.

"Alright. Then we'll get going. It was nice seeing you, Jaune." Erin said.

"Wait." Weiss said.

"Yes?" Erin asked, turning to Weiss.

"Before you go. Can you tell us your story and the story about Shock Street?"

"Yeah. It sounds interesting." Ruby said.

"Which is an understatement." Yatsuhashi added.

"But not the strangest thing we have seen so far." Pyrrha said.

"Are you sure? It is late. And while we don't need sleep, all of you do." Erin asked.

"We're sure. Plus, we're all still a bit on edge with just escaping the Ghost Dog." Ren answered, with the others nodding. Marty and Erin looked at each other before turning to Jaune, who just shrugged. He was fine with so long as they didn't mention Horrorland or that cursed dummy.

"Alright." Marty said.

"But you all might want to use the bathroom and grab a snack or drink before we begin since it is a bit of a long story." Erin said. Nodding, everyone got up to use the bathroom or make some snacks. But everyone kept an eye on the Ghost Dog as they left the room. Yet, they slightly relaxed when they realized the Ghost Dog's attention was on Zwei and Penny.

Ten Minutes Later

"Alright. Let's begin." Marty said as everyone took their seats with their snacks and drinks. And everyone chuckled a bit when Zwei shared one of his treats with the Ghost Dog, who just tilted his head in confusion.

"Before you start." Summer began. "I have to ask. Are you two brother and sister?"

"No. We're best friends."

"But we spent so much time with each other that some people thought we were siblings." Erin added.

"Especially since you two argue and compete with each other just like siblings do." Jaune added, chuckling.

"I take it you grew up with siblings." Summer asked.

"Yup. have seven older sisters."

"Which we still have trouble believing." Ren said, with Pyrrha and Nora agreeing.

"It must have been chaotic." Summer said, remembering the times Yang and Ruby would bicker and mess with each other before Ozpin sent her on that mission that made her miss out on so many years.

"It must have. I mean, I could hardly stand Yang at times when we were growing up. With seven sisters, I would have lost my mind." Ruby said.

"Don't be like that, sis. You loved all my teasing. And I know you will have fun with all the teasing I will do to you in the future. I know I will." Yang said, earning an eye roll from the young reaper.

"Well, it was beyond chaotic. But I still wouldn't trade it for anything." Jaune said.

"Same." Yang and Ruby agreed, causing Summer to smile.

"Any other questions?" Marty asked.

"Or are we ready to start?" Erin asked.

"I would say that's it for now." Coco said.

"Alright. But don't hesitate to stop us if you have any other questions or want us to explain anything." Marty said, earning a nod from everyone.

"Okay. Our story starts a few years ago." Erin began. "We were in a semi-dark room. Marty was shaking like a leaf as he grabbed my sleeve. But he was grabbing it so tightly that he was starting to hurt me a bit."

Story

"Marty, please." I whispered, shaking my arm free. Yet, as I did, I tried my best not to make it seem like I was also scared. But I didn't want to admit it.

It was darker than the darkest night. I squinted hard, trying to see. And then a gray light glowed dimly in front of us. Despite the foggy light, I could still see the fear in Marty's eyes as he ducked. He grabbed my arm again as his mouth dropped open. I could hear him breathing hard and fast. And despite the fear coursing through my veins, I couldn't help but smile at seeing Marty so scared.

I really enjoyed it. I know, I know. That's terrible. I admit it. Erin Wright is a bad person. What kind of a friend am I? But Marty always brags that he is braver than me. And he is typically correct. He usually is the brave one, while I'm the wimp. But not today. That's why seeing Marty gasp in fright and grab my arm made me smile.

The gray light ahead of us slowly grew brighter. I heard crunching sounds rapidly approaching us from both sides. But Marty and I didn't turn around. We kept our eyes straight ahead.

Waiting. Watching. ...

As I squinted into the gray light, a long fence came into view. As it got closer, the more details we could make out. Its paint was faded and peeling. A hand-lettered sign appeared on the fence: **DANGER. KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU.**

Marty and I both gasped when we heard the scraping sounds. They were soft at first but grew louder. It sounded like massive claws scraping against the other side of the fence. I tried to swallow, but my mouth suddenly felt dry. I had the urge to just turn and run as fast as possible.

But I couldn't leave Marty there all alone. And besides, if I ran away now, he would never let me forget it. He'd tease me about it forever. So I stayed beside him, listening as the scraping, clawing sounds turned into banging, followed by loud crashes.

Was someone trying to break through the fence?

We moved quickly along the fence. We picked up the pace with each pacing second, and soon, the fence became a gray blur from how fast we were running. But the sound followed us, with heavy footsteps coming from the other side. We stared straight ahead. We were on an empty but familiar street. Yes, we had been here before. The pavement was puddled with rainwater. The puddles glowed in the pale light from the street lamps.

I took a deep breath as Marty gripped my arm harder. Our mouths fell open when, to our horror, the fence began to shake. It shook so violently that the whole street started to rock. The rain puddles splashed against the curb as the footsteps thundered closer.

"Marty!" I gasped.

Before I could say another word, the fence crumbled to the ground, and the monster came bursting out. It had a head like a wolf - snapping jaws of gleaming white teeth - and a body like a giant crab. It swung four huge claws in front of it, clicking them at us as its snout pulled open in a throaty growl.

"NO000000!" Marty and I shouted as we jumped to our feet. But there was nowhere to run as the wolf crab crawled toward us.

"Please sit down, kids." Someone said from behind us. "I can't see the screen."

"Ssshhhh!" Someone else whispered.

Marty and I glanced at each other, feeling like jerks. Well, I know I did. We dropped back into our seats as we watched the wolf crab scamper across the street, chasing after a little boy on a tricycle.

"What's your problem, Erin?" Marty whispered, shaking his head. "It's only a movie. Why did you scream like that?"

"You screamed, too!" I retorted.

"I only screamed because you screamed!"

"Sssshhh!" Someone said, sounding annoyed.

I sank low in my seat. I heard crunching sounds all around me. People ate popcorn while someone coughed from behind me. On the screen, the wolf-crab reached out his big, red claws and grabbed the kid on the trike.

SNAP.

SNAP.

Good-bye, kid.

Some people in the theater laughed. It was pretty funny. That's the great thing about the Shocker on Shock Street movies. They make you scream and laugh at the same time. Marty and I sat back and enjoyed the rest of the movie. We love scary movies, but the Shock Street films are our favorites. In the end, the police caught the wolf crab. They boiled him in a big pot of water before serving him to the whole town, with everyone saying it was delicious as they dipped the crab in butter sauce.

It was the perfect ending. Marty and I clapped and cheered. Marty put two fingers in his mouth and whistled through his teeth the way he always does. We had just seen Shocker on Shock Street VI, and it was the best of the series. The theater lights came on. We got up, grabbed our trash, and made our way out of the theater.

"Great special effects." A man told his friend.

"Special effects?" The friend asked, smiling. "I thought it was all real!"

"Pretty good movie." Marty said, bumping me hard from behind. For some reason, he always thought it was funny when he tried to knock me over.

"Huh? Pretty good?" I asked, turning to him.

"Well, it wasn't scary enough. Actually, it was kind of babyish. Shocker V was a lot scarier."

"Marty, you screamed your head off. Remember?" I asked, rolling my eyes. "You jumped out of your seat. You grabbed my arm and-"

"I only did that because I saw how scared you were." Marty mocked, grinning.

What a liar! Why can't he ever admit it when he's scared? He stuck his foot out and tried to trip me. I dodged to the left, stumbled, and accidentally bumped into a young woman.

"Hey! Look out!" She shouted. "You twins should be more careful."

"We're not twins!" Marty and I simultaneously shouted.

We're not even brother and sister. We're not related in any way. But people always think that Marty and I are twins. I guess we do look a lot alike. We're both twelve years old. And we're both pretty short and kind of chubby. We both have round faces, short black hair, and

blue eyes. And we both have little noses that sort of turn up. But we're not twins! We're only friends.

I apologized to the woman before turning back to Marty, who stuck his tongue out at me as he tried to trip me again. I stumbled but quickly caught my balance. Then I stuck out my shoe and tripped him. We kept tripping each other through the long lobby. People were staring at us, but we didn't care. We were laughing too hard.

"Do you know the coolest thing about this movie?" I asked.

"No. What?" Marty asked.

"That we're the first kids in the world to see it!"

"Yeah!" Marty and I agreed before high-fiving each other.

We had just seen Shocker on Shock Street VI at a special sneak preview. My dad works with a lot of movie people, and he got us tickets for it. Everyone else in the theater was an adult. Marty and I were the only kids.

"Know what else was really cool?" I asked. "The monsters. All of them. They looked so incredibly real. It didn't look like special effects at all."

"Well, I thought the Electric Eel Woman was pretty phony-looking. She didn't look like an eel - she looked like a big worm!" Marty said, sounding disappointed.

"Then why did you jump out of your seat when she shot a bolt of electricity and fried that gang of teenagers?"

"I didn't jump. You did!"

"Did not! You jumped because it looked so real. And I heard you choke when the Toxic Creep leaped out of the nuclear waste pit."

"I choked on a Milk Dud, that's all."

"You were scared, Marty, because it was so real."

"Hey. What if they are real?!" Marty asked. "What if it isn't special effects? What if they're all real monsters?"

"Don't be dumb."

We turned the corner into another hall where the wolf crab was waiting for us. I didn't even have time to scream. He opened his toothy jaws in a long wolf howl and wrapped two giant red claws around my waist. I opened my mouth to scream, but only a squeak came out. I heard people laughing.

The big claws slid off my waist, and I realized they were plastic. I saw two dark eyes staring out at me from behind the wolf mask. I should have known that it was a man in a costume. But I didn't expect him to be standing there.

I was surprised, that's all.

I blinked at a white flash of light. A man had just taken a picture of the creature. I saw a big red and yellow sign against the wall: **SEE THE MOVIE - THEN PLAY THE GAME ONLINE.**

"Sorry if I scared you." The man inside the wolf crab costume said softly.

"She scares easily!" Marty interjected. I gave a hard shove before leaving. Glancing back, I saw the creature waving his claw at us.

"We've got to go upstairs and see my dad." I said.

"Tell me something I don't know."

Marty thinks he's so funny. Dad's office is upstairs from the theater, on the twenty-ninth floor. We jogged to the elevators at the end of the hall and took one up. Dad has a really cool job. He builds theme parks. And he designs all kinds of rides.

Dad was one of the designers of Prehistoric Park. That's the big theme park where you go back to prehistoric times. It has all kinds of neat rides and shows and dozens of huge dinosaur robots wandering around. And Dad worked on the Fantasy Films Studio Tour. Everyone who comes to Hollywood goes on that tour.

Dad's idea was the part where you walk through a huge movie screen and find yourself in a world of movie characters. You can star in any kind of movie you want to be in!

I know it sounds as if I'm bragging, but Dad is brilliant, and he's an engineering genius! I think he is the world's expert on robots. He can build robots that will do anything! And he uses them in all his parks and studio tours. Marty and I stepped off the elevator on the twenty-ninth floor. We waved to the woman at the front desk. Then we hurried to Dad's office at the end of the hall.

It looks more like a playroom than an office. It's a massive room filled with toys and stuffed cartoon characters, movie posters, and models of monsters. Marty and I love to roam around the office, staring at all the neat stuff. On the walls, Dad has great posters from a dozen different movies. On a long table, he has a model of The Tumbler, the upside-down roller coaster he designed. The model has little cars that really screech around the tracks.

And he has a lot of cool stuff from Shock Street - like one of the original furry paws that Wolf Girl wore in Nightmare on Shock Street. He keeps it in a glass case on the windowsill. Dad has models of tramcars, little trains, planes, rockets, and even a big silver plastic blimp. It's radio-controlled, and he can make it float around and around his office.

What a great place! I always think of Dad's office as the happiest place in the world. But today, as Marty and I stepped inside, Dad didn't look too happy. He hunched over his desk with the telephone to his ear. His head was lowered, his eyes down. He kept a hand pressed against his forehead as he mumbled into the phone.

Dad and I don't look at all alike. I'm short and dark. He's tall and thin. And he has blond hair, although there's not much left of it. He's pretty bald. He has the kind of skin that turns red easily. His cheeks get real pink when he talks. And he wears big, round glasses with dark frames that hide his brown eyes. Marty and I stopped at the doorway. I don't think Dad saw us. He stared down at the desk. He had his tie pulled down and his shirt collar open. He muttered for a short while longer as Marty and I crept into the office. Finally, Dad set down the phone before looking up and seeing us.

"Oh, hi, you two." Dad said softly as his cheeks turned bright pink.

"Dad. What's wrong?" I asked. He sighed before pulling off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I have very bad news, Erin. Very bad news."

"Dad. What is it? What?" I asked, worried. But I realized I had been tricked when a grin slowly formed on his face.

"Gotcha!" Dad shouted, his brown eyes flashing gleefully. "Gotcha

again. You fall for that gag every time."

"Dad!" I let out an angry cry. Then I rushed up to the desk, wrapped my hands around his neck, and pretended to strangle him. We both collapsed against each other, laughing.

"Mr. Wright, that is so lame." Marty said, shaking his head. Dad struggled to slip his glasses back on.

"I'm sorry. You kids are just too easy to fool. I couldn't resist." Dad said, smiling. "Actually, I've got good news."

"Good news? Is this another joke?" I asked suspiciously. He shook his head as he picked up something from his desk.

"Check this out, guys. Do you know what this is?" Marty and I came closer to examine what Dad had in his hand. It was a little, white

plastic vehicle with four wheels.

"Some kind of train car?" I guessed.

"It's a tramcar." Dad explained, pointing to the front of the model where the engine was. "See? People sit on long benches inside it. Here. It's motor-driven. "But do you know where this tramcar will be used?"

"Dad, we give up. Just tell us." I said impatiently. "Stop keeping us in suspense."

"Okay, okay. This is a model of the tram that will be used at the Shocker Studio Tour." Dad said as our mouths dropped open.

"Do you mean the tour is finally going to open?" I knew that Dad had

been working on it for years.

"Yes. We're finally about to open it to the public. But before we do, I want you two to test it out."

"Huh? You mean it?" I shrieked. I was so excited; I felt as if I'd burst out of my skin! I turned to Marty and saw that he was leaping up and down with both fists in the air.

"I built this whole tour, and I want you two to be the first kids in the world to go on it. I want to know your opinion. What you like and what you don't like."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Marty shouted. I honestly thought I would have to tie a rope around his waist to keep him from flying off because of how high he was leaping.

"Dad - the Shock Street movies are the best!" I said, excited. "This is awesome! Is the tour very scary?"

"I hope so." Dad said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I tried to make it as scary and real as I could. You get on the tram, and you

ride through the whole movie studio. You get to meet all of the characters from the horror movies. And then the tram takes you on a slow ride down Shock Street."

"The real Shock Street?" Marty cried. "Do you mean it? We get to ride down the real street where they make the movies?"

"Yes. The real Shock Street."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Marty shouted, pumping his fists into the air like a maniac.

"Awesome! Totally awesome!" I shouted. But I became confused when Marty suddenly stopped jumping, with his expression turning serious.

"Maybe Erin shouldn't go." He said, surprising me. "She gets too scared."

"Huh?" I cried, shocked and slightly annoyed.

"She was so scared during the movie sneak preview. I had to hold her hand." Marty said.

What a liar!

"Give me a break!" I shouted. "If anyone was a scaredy-cat wimp, it was you, Marty!"

"Calm down, guys." Dad said, raising his hands. "No arguing. You have to keep together. You know, you two will be the only ones on the tour tomorrow. The only ones."

"Yes!" Marty cheered happily. "Yes! Yes!"

"Wow! That's great! It's totally great. It's going to be the best!" I shouted ecstatically. But an idea came to my mind. "Can Mom come, too? I bet she would really enjoy it."

"Excuse me?" Dad asked, surprised, squinting at me. His whole face turned bright red. "What did you say?"

"I asked if Mom could come, too." I answered. Dad kept staring at me for a long time, studying me.

"Are you feeling okay, Erin?" Dad asked after a few tense moments.

"Yes. Fine." I suddenly felt very confused and upset. Had I done wrong? Was something wrong with Mom? Why was Dad staring at me like that?

Real World

"Wait." Ruby said.

"Yes?" Erin asked.

"So, all the Shocker on Shock Street movies were filmed here?"

"Yup. They were all filmed on this very street." Marty answered.

"Did people and/or creatures live here while those films were being shot?" Summer asked.

"And are they still here?" Pyrrha asked.

"Yes, but not entirely. Only a few blocks had people/creatures living in them. But most of the 'normal' people packed up their stuff and left after the theme park was abandoned." Marty answered.

"And I think four or five of the creatures also moved but for different reasons." Erin added before quickly saying when she noticed the look Jaune sent her way. "Like being closer to work or finding a cheaper place to live. Or even being closer to family."

"And about two or three months after the stuff from the theme parks was used to build more homes, we saw the first wave of new creatures moving in."

"And it has become peaceful ever since."

"Any other questions, or shall we continue?" Marty asked.

"Yes. Two." Weiss answered.

"What are they?" Erin asked.

"First. Was that the first time you did something that your creator did not program you with?"

"I would say so.." Marty answered.

"At least as far as we can tell." Erin added.

"Okay."

"What's your other question?" Marty asked.

"Do you know what could have caused you to obtain those false memories? Like having a mother."

"Not... really." Erin said.

"Our creator said it was a problem with our chips that were somehow damaged." Marty said.

"But it has to be more than that since he failed to repair the chips. Not to mention, he said he didn't know what could have damaged the chips."

"So they could have come from anywhere?" Coco asked.

"Pretty much."

"Perhaps they could have come from a faulty motherboard or circuit board and made some memories go to another part, where it led to you thinking you have a mother." Penny suggested, confusing everyone.

"Um. What do you mean by that, Penny?" Ruby asked.

"Do you know what a black box is, Friend Ruby?"

"No." Ruby answered after racking her brain for an answer.

"Black boxes are essentially recorders. They are mainly used on planes to record the flight data. That way, if the plane crashes, they would have a good place to start on finding out what could have caused it to crash." Blake explained.

"Oh."

"Do androids have black boxes?" Nora asked

"Yes and no. We essentially have the same thing, but it's for robots and andoids." Marty answered.

"But how does that tie in with the memory thing?" Velvet asked, confused.

"Since we don't have a hippocampus like all of you do, we store our knowledge and memories in a storage drive. However, we all have a set of protocols or programs put in place that allow us to respond appropriately to a situation. Perhaps a glitch or faulty chip could have caused some of the newly acquired data to go to the protocols instead of the storage device. And with this new information, they could have adapted to how to respond with two parents instead of one. However, this is a bit of a stretch." Penny explained.

"Yeah. A bit of a stretch." Marty said.

"But it doesn't matter in the end since we are now our own people now. And we have free will to do what we want and create new memories." Erin added.

"True." Most of the others said.

"Like the memories that Ruby and..." Yang began but went quiet when Summer gave a warning glance.

"Behave, Yang." Summer warned.

"Anyway. Let's continue with the story." Marty said.

"Yeah. After I told our creator that I felt fine, he stared at me for a few moments before coming around the desk and placing his hands on my shoulders again. He then said he thought we would have a better time if we went to the theme park by ourselves." Erin continued.

Story

"Don't you agree?" Dad asked.

"Yeah. I guess." I answered. I still wondered why he was staring at me so suspiciously. But I decided not to ask him. I didn't want him to get angry or something and change his mind about us going on the tour.

"Do you mean you're not coming with us?" Marty asked. "We're really going by ourselves?"

"I want you to go by yourselves." Dad replied. "I think that will make it more exciting for you."

"I hope it's really scary!" Marty said, grinning at me.

"Don't worry." Dad assured with a strange smile spreading over his face. "You won't be disappointed."

The next afternoon, a gray haze hung in the air as Dad drove Marty and me to Shocker Studios. I sat up front with Dad, peering out the car window at the smog.

"It's so gloomy out." I murmured.

"Perfect for a horror movie tour." Marty interjected from the backseat.

Marty was so excited he could barely sit still. He kept bouncing his legs up and down and tapping his hands on the leather seat. I had never seen Marty so crazed. If he didn't have his seat belt to hold him down, he'd probably bounce right out of the car!

The car climbed up the Hollywood hills. The narrow road curved past redwood houses, and tree-filled yards cut into the sides of the hills. As we climbed, the sky turned even darker. It was almost as if we were driving up into a fog cloud. Far in the distance, I could see the HOLLYWOOD sign stretching in the haze across a dark peak.

"Hope it doesn't rain." I muttered, watching the fog roll over the sign.

"You know it never rains here in Ga-Metru!" Dad chuckled.

"Which monsters are we going to see?" Marty asked. "Is Shockro on the tour? Do we really get to walk on Shock Street?"

"Dad said as he carefully navigated the twisting and curving roads. "I don't want to spoil it for you. I want it all to be a surprise."

"I just wanted to know so I could warn Erin. I don't want her to get too scared. She might faint or something." Marty said, laughing. I let out a growl before turning around and trying to punch him. But I couldn't reach him. Marty leaned forward and messed up my hair with both hands.

"Get off me!" I screamed. "I'm warning you!"

"Take it easy, guys. We're here." Dad said.

We turned and stared out the windshield. The road had flattened out. Up ahead, an enormous sign proclaimed SHOCKER STUDIOS in scary, blood-red letters. We drove slowly up to the huge iron gates in the front. The gates were closed. A guard in a small black booth sat reading a newspaper. I glimpsed gold script letters above the gate. They spelled out one word: **BEWARE.**

Dad pulled right up to the gate, and the guard peered up. He gave Dad a big smile. Then the guard pressed a button, and the gates slowly swung open. Dad drove the car into the tall white parking garage beside the studio. He parked in the first space next to the entrance. The garage seemed to stretch on forever. But I could see only three or four other cars inside.

"When we open next week, this garage will be jammed!" Dad said. "There will be thousands of people here. I hope."

"And today, we're the only ones!" Marty cried excitedly, jumping out of the car.

"We're so lucky!" I agreed.

A few minutes later, we were standing on the platform outside the main building, facing a wide street, waiting for the tram to take us on the tour. The street led to dozens of white studio buildings spread out all the way down the hill.

"Those are the sound stages." Dad said, pointing to two enormous buildings. "They film a lot of movie scenes inside those buildings."

"Does the tour go inside them?" Marty demanded, jumping up and down. "Where is Shock Street? Where are the monsters? Are they making a movie now? Can we watch them making it?"

"Whoa!" Dad cried, placing his hands on Marty's shoulders as if to keep him from flying off the ground. I had never seen Marty so totally wired! "Take it easy, fella. You'll blow a fuse! You won't survive the tour!"

"Maybe we should put him on a leash." I said.

"Arf, arf!" Marty barked. Then he snapped his teeth at me, trying to bite me.

I rolled my eyes as I shivered. The fog rolled in from the hills. The air felt damp and cold. The sky darkened. Two men in business suits came zooming along the street in a golf cart. They were both talking at once. One of them waved to Dad.

"Can we ride in one of those carts?" Marty asked. "Can Erin and I each have our own cart?"

"No way." Dad answered. "You have to take the automated tram. And remember - stay in the tramcar. No matter what."

"You mean we can't walk on Shock Street?"

"Not allowed. You have to stay on the tram." Dad answered before turning to me.

"I'll be waiting for you here on the platform when you return. I want a full report. I want to know what you like and what you don't like. And don't worry if things don't work exactly right. There are still a few bugs to work out."

"Hey! Here comes the tram!" Marty cried, hopping up and down and pointing.

The tram came rolling silently around the corner. I counted six tramcars in all. They were shaped like rollercoaster cars, open on top - only much longer and wider. The cars were black. A grinning white skull was painted on the front of the first car. A young, red-haired woman wearing a black uniform was seated on the first bench in the front car. She waved to us as the tram rolled up to the platform. She was the only passenger. She hopped out as the tram stopped.

"Hi, I'm Linda. I'm your tour guide." She said, smiling at my dad as her red hair fluttered in the wind.

"Hello, Linda. Here are your first two victims." Dad said, smiling, as he shoved Marty and me forward. Linda laughed and asked us our

names, which we told her.

"Can we ride in front?" Marty asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course," Linda replied. "You can sit anywhere you want. This whole ride is just for you."

"All right!" Marty cried as we high-fived each other.

"I think Marty is ready to begin." Dad said, laughing. Linda pushed her red hair out of her face.

"You can start right away, guys. But first, there's something I have to do." Linda said before leaning over the tramcar and tugging out a black canvas bag. Opening it, she pulled out a red plastic gun and gripped it tightly. It honestly looked like something from the Star Trek movies. But I became confused when her smile faded while her green eyes narrowed. "This is a Shocker Stun Ray Blaster. Be careful with these blasters, guys. They can freeze a monster in its tracks from twenty feet. Don't fire them unless you have to. I sure hope you don't have to."

"You're kidding - right? These are just toys - right?" I asked, chuckling as Linda handed it to me. But instead of answering, she pulled out another blasted and was about to give it to Marty but tripped on a cord.

"Ohh!" Linda let out a startled cry as the blaster went off in her hand. A loud buzz followed by a bright ray of yellow light, and before we knew it, Linda stood frozen on the platform.

"Linda! Linda!" I screamed as Marty's mouth dropped open. He let out a choked gurgle. I turned to Dad, and to my surprise, he was laughing.

"Dad - she's - she's frozen!" I cried. But when I turned back to Linda, she had a big smile on her face, too. It took us both a while, but we soon realized the whole thing was a joke.

"That's the first shock on the Shocker tour." Linda announced, lowering the red blaster. She put a hand on Marty's shoulder. "I think I really shocked you, Marty!"

"No way!" Marty insisted. "I knew it was a joke. I just played along."

"Come on, Marty!" I cried, rolling my eyes. "You nearly dropped your teeth!"

"Erin, I wasn't scared." Marty insisted sharply. "Really. I just went along with the joke. Do you really think I'd fall for a dumb plastic blaster gun?"

Marty is such a jerk. Why can't he ever admit it when he's scared?

"Climb in, you two. Let's get this show on the road." Dad said. Marty and I climbed into the front seat of the tram. I looked for a seat belt or a safety bar, but there wasn't one.

"Are you coming with us?" I asked Linda, causing her to shake her head.

"No. You're on your own. The tram moves automatically." Linda said, handing Marty his Stun Blaster. "Hope you don't need it."

"Yeah. Sure." Marty muttered, rolling his eyes. "This gun is so babyish."

"Remember. I'll meet you back here at the end of the ride." Dad said, waving. "Enjoy it. I want a full report."

"Don't get out of the tram. Keep your head and arms inside. And don't stand up while the tram is moving." Linda reminded us. She stepped on a blue button on the platform. The tram started up with a jolt. Marty and I were thrown back against the seat. Then, the tram rolled smoothly forward. "First stop is The Haunted House of Horror! Good luck!"

I turned back to see her waving to us, her long red hair fluttering in the wind. A strong breeze blew against us as the tram made its way down the hill. The sky was nearly as dark as night. Some of the white studio buildings were hidden by the fog.

"Stupid gun." Marty muttered, rolling it around in his hands. "Why do we need this plastic gun? I hope the whole tour isn't this babyish."

"I hope you don't complain all afternoon." I said, annoyed. "Do you realize how awesome this is? We're going to see all the great creatures from the Shocker movies."

"Think we'll see Shockro?" Shockro was his favorite monster. The only reason that I could think of was that Shockro was gross.

"Probably," I replied, my eyes on the low buildings we were passing. They all stood dark and empty. It was almost eerie.

"I want to see Wolf Boy and Wolf Girl." Marty said, counting the monsters off on his fingers. "And... the Piranha People, and Captain Sick, The Great Gopher Mutant, and -"

"Wow! Look!" I cried, pounding his shoulder and pointing.

As the tram turned a sharp corner, The Haunted House of Horror loomed darkly before us. The fog hid the tall, stone turrets as the rest of the mansion stood gray against the dusky sky. The tram took us nearer. Tall weeds, bending and swaying in the wind, choked the front lawn. The gray shingles on the house were chipped and peeling. A pale green light, a dim, eerie light, floated out from the tall window in front. As we rode closer, I could see a rusty iron porch swinging by itself on a broken, rotting porch.

"Cool!" I shouted.

"It looks a lot smaller than in the movie." Marty grumbled.

"It's exactly the same house!"

"Then why does it look so much smaller?"

What a complainer!

I turned away from him and studied The Haunted House. An iron fence surrounded the place. As we moved around to the side, the rusty gate swung open, squeaking and creaking.

"Look!" I pointed to the dark windows on the second floor. The shutters all flew open at once, then banged shut again. Lights came on in the windows. Through the window shades, I could see the silhouettes of skeletons hanging, swinging slowly back and forth.

"That's kind of cool. But not too scary." Marty said as he raised his plastic gun and pretended to shoot at the skeletons.

We circled The Haunted House of Horror once. We could hear screams of terror from inside. The shutters banged again and again. The porch swing continued to creak back and forth, back and forth, as if taken by a ghost.

"Are we going inside or not?" Marty demanded impatiently.

"Sit back and stop complaining," I said sharply. "The ride just started. Don't spoil it for me, okay?"

He stuck his tongue out at me. But he settled back against the seat. We heard a long howl and then a shrill scream of horror. The tram made its way silently to the back of the house. A gate swung open, and we rolled through it. We moved quickly through the overgrown, weed-choked backyard. The tram picked up speed. We bounced over the lawn as we approached the back door. A wooden sign above the door read: **ABANDON ALL HOPE.**

For a moment, I thought we were going to crash. I ducked and raised my hands to shield myself. But the door creaked open, and we burst inside. The tram slowed. I lowered my hands and sat up. We were in a dark, dust-covered kitchen. An invisible ghost cackled, an evil

laugh. Battered pots and pans covered the wall. As we passed, they clattered to the floor. The oven door opened and closed by itself. The teapot on the stove started to whistle. Dishes on the shelves rattled. The cackling grew louder.

"This is pretty creepy." I whispered.

"Ooh. Thrills and chills!" Marty replied sarcastically. He crossed his arms in front of him. "Bor-ring!"

"Marty! Give me a break. You can be a bad sport if you want. But don't ruin it for me." I said as I shoved him away. That seemed to get to him.

"Sorry." Marty muttered as he scooted back next to me.

The tram moved out of the dark kitchen into an even darker hallway. Paintings of goblins and ugly creatures hung on the hallway walls. As we approached a closet door, it sprang open - and a shrieking skeleton popped out in front of us, its jaws open, its arms jutting out to grab us. I screamed while Marty laughed. The skeleton snapped back into the closet. The tram turned a corner. As we rode into a large, round room, I saw flickering light up ahead.

"It's the living room." I whispered to Marty.

I raised my eyes to the flickering light and saw a chandelier above our heads with a dozen burning candles. The tram stopped beneath it. The chandelier began to shake. Then, with a hiss, the candles all flickered out at once. The room plunged into darkness. Then, a deep laugh echoed all around us.

"Welcome to my humble home!" A deep voice suddenly boomed.

"Who is that?" I whispered to Marty. "Where is it coming from?"

No reply.

"Hey - Marty?" I turned to him. "Marty?"

He was gone.

Marty?"

My breath caught in my throat. I froze, staring into the darkness. Where did Marty go? He knows we aren't supposed to leave the tramcar. Did he climb out? No. If he had, I would have heard him.

"Marty?"

Someone grabbed my arm. I heard a soft laugh. It was Marty's laugh.

"Hey - where are you? I can't see you!" I asked.

"I can't see you, either." Marty answered. "But I didn't move. I'm still sitting right next to you."

"Huh?" I reached out and felt the sleeve of his shirt.

"This is cool! I'm waving my arms, but I can't see a thing. You really can't see me?"

"No. I thought-"

"It's some kind of trick with the lights. Blacklight or something. Some kind of neat movie special effect."

"Well, it creeped me out. I really thought you disappeared."

"Sucker." Marty mocked.

And then we both jumped.

A fire suddenly blazed in the big brick fireplace. Bright orange light filled the room. A big black armchair spun around to reveal a grinning skeleton. The skeleton raised its bony yellowed head. The jaws moved.

"I hope you like my house." Its voice boomed. "Because you will never leave!"

It tossed back its head and let out an evil cackle. The tram jolted to a start. We rumbled out of the living room into a long, dark hallway. The skeleton's laugh followed us into the hall. I fell back against the seat as we picked up speed. We whirred around a corner. Down another long hall, so dark I couldn't see the walls.

Faster. Faster.

We whipped around another corner and then another. We were climbing now. And then we took a sharp dip that made both of us throw up our hands and scream. Around another sharp turn. Up, up, up. And then we came crashing down. A wild rollercoaster ride in total darkness. It was awesome. And the fact that we didn't expect it made it even better. Marty and I screamed our heads off. We bumped hard against each other as the tram whirled around in the black halls of The Haunted House of Horror. Up, up, again - then we tilted sharply down. I hung on to the front of the car for dear life. I gripped it so hard that both hands ached. There was no seat belt or safety bar.

'What if we tumbled out?' I wondered.

The car tilted sharply sideways as if reading my frightened thoughts. I let out a shriek and lost my grip. I slid against the side of the car. Marty fell on top of me. I frantically reached out for something to hold on to. The car tilted back right side up. I took a deep breath and slid back into place on the long seat.

"Whoa! That was excellent!" Marty cried, laughing. "Excellent!"

Gripping the front of the car, I took another deep breath and held it. I was trying to slow my racing heart. A door swung open before us, and we burst through it. The car bounced hard. I saw trees and the gray-fogged sky. We were back outside, racing through the

backyard. We were tossed from side to side as we roared over the weeds, zigzagging through the dark trees.

"Whoa! Stop!" I choked out.

I couldn't catch my breath. The wind blew hard against my face. The tram clattered and squealed as we bumped over the rough ground. We were out of control. Something had definitely gone wrong with the tram. Bouncing hard on the plastic seat, holding on tightly, I searched for someone who could help us. But there was no one in sight. We bumped onto the road. The tram started to slow. I turned to Marty. His hair was blown over his face. His mouth hung open. His eyes rolled around in his head. He was totally dazed. The tram slowed, slowed, slowed until we were creeping smoothly along.

"That was great!" Marty declared as he smoothed back his hair with both hands and grinned at me. I knew he had been scared, too. But he was pretending that he enjoyed the crazy, wild ride.

"Yeah. Great." I tried to pretend, too. But my voice came out weak and shaky.

"I'm going to tell your dad that the rollercoaster ride through the halls was the best!"

"It was kind of fun." I agreed. "And kind of scary."

"Hey. Where are we?"

The tram had come to a stop. I pulled myself up and peered around. We had parked between two rows of tall evergreen bushes. The bushes were slender, shaped like spears reaching up to the sky. Above us, the afternoon sun was trying to break through the fog. Rays of pale light beamed down from the gray sky. The tall, thin shadows of the bushes fell over our tramcar. Marty stood up and turned to the back of the tram.

"There's nothing around here." Marty said. "We're in the middle of nowhere. Why did we stop?"

"Do you think -?" I started. But I stopped talking when I saw the bush move. It wiggled. Then the bush next to it wiggled, too. But I felt a chill go down my spine when I saw two glowing red circles behind the bush. Swallowing hard, I grabbed Marty's sleeve and tugged it as more pairs of eyes appeared. "Marty. Marty. There's someone there."

More and more red, glowing eyes appeared all over the bushes. Then, from behind us, two dark claws appeared. And then rustling sounds. The bush tilted as a dark figure leaped out, followed by another.

Snarling. Growling.

I gasped. It was too late to run. We were surrounded by the ugly creatures. Snuffling, wheezing creatures staggered out from the bushes. They slowly reached for us as they climbed onto the tram.

"Ohhhhhh." I heard Marty shiver as we jumped to our feet. I started to back away. I thought maybe I could scramble out the other side of the car. But the snarling, growling monsters came at us from both sides.

"L-leave us alone!" I stammered.

A monster covered in tangled brown fur opened his jaws to reveal long, jagged rows of yellow teeth. His hot breath exploded in my face. He stepped closer. Then he swiped at me with a fat paw and uttered a menacing roar.

"Would you like an autograph?" The creature growled, surprising us.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Autographed photo?" He asked. He raised his furry paw again. He held a black-and-white snap-shot in it.

"Hey! You're Ape Face!" Marty shouted, recognizing the monster.

"Want a photo? This is the autographing part of the tour." Ape Face said, nodding.

"Yeah! Okay." Marty answered.

The big ape pulled a marker from behind his ear and bent to sign the photo for Marty. Now that my heartbeat was returning to normal, I began recognizing some other creatures. The guy covered in purple slime was The Toxic Wild Man. And I recognized Sweet Sue, the walking-talking baby doll with real hair you can brush. Sweet Sue was a mutant murderer from Mars. The frog-faced guy covered from head to toe with purple and brown warts was The Fabulous Frog, also known as The Toadinator. He starred in Pond Scum and Pond Scum II, two of the scariest movies ever made.

"Frog. Can I have your autograph?" I asked, walking up to him.

"Grrrbbit. Grrbit." He croaked and slipped a pen into his wart-covered hand. I leaned forward eagerly and watched him sign his photo. It was hard for him to write. The pen kept slipping in his slimy frog hands.

Marty and I collected a bunch of autographs. Then the creatures went snarling and wheezing back into the bushes. When they were gone, we both burst out laughing.

"That was so dumb!" I cried. "When I saw them creeping out from behind the bushes, I thought I'd have a cow! But it's kind of cool to get their autographs."

"It's just a bunch of actors in costumes." Marty sneered. "It's for babies."

"But... but they looked so real. It didn't look as if they were wearing costumes - did it? I mean, The Toadinator's hands were really slimy. And Ape Face's fur was so real. The masks were awesome. I

couldn't tell they were masks." I stammered as I brushed the hair out of my eyes. "How do they get into those costumes? I didn't see any buttons or zippers or anything!"

"That's because they're movie costumes." Marty explained. "They're better than regular costumes."

Mr. Know-It-All.

The tram started to back out. I settled down into the seat. I watched the two rows of evergreen bushes fade into the distance. Down the long, sloping hill, I could see the white studio buildings. I wondered if they were making a movie on one of the sound stages and if the tram would take us to watch them shoot. I could see two golf carts moving along the road. They were carrying people down to the soundstage buildings. The sun still struggled to shine through the fog as the tram bounced over the hill.

"Whoa!" I cried out as we turned sharply and headed back toward the trees.

"Please remain in the car at all times." A woman's voice burst from a speaker in the tram car. "Your next stop will be The Cave of The Living Creeps."

"The Cave of The Living Creeps? Wow! That sounds scary!" Marty said.

"Sure does!" I agreed.

We had no idea just how scary it would turn out to be. The tram zigzagged its way through the trees. Their shadows rolled over us like dark ghosts. We moved so silently. I tried to imagine what the ride would be like if the tram was packed with excited kids and adults. I decided it would be a lot less scary with a crowd. But I wasn't complaining. Marty and I were really lucky to be the first kids ever to try out this ride.

"Wow!" Marty grabbed my arm as The Cave of The Living Creeps loomed before us.

The mouth of the cave was a huge dark hole cut into the side of the hill. I could see pale, silvery light flickering past the entrance. The tram slowed down as we approached the dark opening. A sign above the entrance had one word carved roughly into it: **FAREWELL.**

"Hey!" I cried, ducking as the tramcar suddenly lurched forward. What a tight squeeze! As we entered, all that illuminated us was a dim, flickering light. The air instantly grew colder. And damp. A sour, earthy smell rose to my nostrils, making me gag.

"Bats! What do you think, Erin? Think there are bats in here?" Marty whispered into my ear, knowing I hated bats.

I know, I know. Bats aren't really evil creatures. And they aren't dangerous. Bats eat mosquitoes and other insects. And they don't attack people or get tangled in your hair or try to suck your blood. That's only in movies. I know all that. But I don't care. Bats are ugly and, creepy and disgusting. And I hate them. One day, I told Marty how much I hate bats. And so he's been teasing me about them ever since.

'I regret telling him that.' I thought as the tram moved deeper into the cave. The air grew colder. The sour aroma nearly choked me.

"Look! Over there!" Marty screamed. "A vampire bat!"

"Huh? Where?" I couldn't help myself. I cried out in alarm. Of course, it was one of Marty's dumb jokes. He laughed like a maniac. I growled at him and punched him hard on the shoulder. "You're not funny. You're just dumb."

"I'll bet there are bats in this cave." Marty said, laughing his butt off. "You can't go into a deep, dark cave like this one without seeing bats."

I turned away from his grinning face and listened hard. I was listening for the sound of fluttering batwings. I didn't hear any. The cave narrowed. The walls seemed to close in on us. The side of the car scraped against the dirt wall. I could feel that we were heading down. In the dim, silvery light, I saw a long row of pointy icicle-type things hanging down from the cave ceiling. I know they have a name, but I can never remember which one it is. Is it stalagmites or stalactites? I ducked my head again as the tram shot under them. Up close, they looked like pointed elephant tusks.

"We're getting closer to the bats!" Marty teased. I ignored him. I kept my eyes straight ahead. The cave grew wide again. Dark shadows shifted and danced over the walls as we rolled past.

"Ohhh." I said as I felt something cold and slimy drop onto the back of my neck. I jerked away and turned sharply to Marty. "Cut it out! Get your cold hands off me!"

"Who - me?" He asked, confused. He wasn't touching me. Both of his hands gripped the front of the car. Then what was on the back of my neck? So cold and wet. Icy wet. I shuddered. My whole body shook.

"M-Marty! H-help!" I stammered. Marty stared at me, confused.

"Erin - what's your problem?"

"The back of my neck."

I could feel the cold, wet thing start to move. I decided not to wait for Marty to help me. I reached back and pulled it off. It felt sticky and cold between my fingers. It slithered and wriggled, and I dropped it on the seat.

A worm!

A huge, long white worm. So cold, so wet and cold!

"Weird!" Marty exclaimed. He leaned close to examine it. "I've never seen a worm that big! And it's white."

"It-it dropped from the ceiling." I said, watching it wiggle next to me. "It's ice-cold."

"Huh? Let me touch it." Marty said. He raised his hand and slowly lowered his pointer finger to the worm. His finger poked the worm in its middle. And then Marty opened his mouth in a scream of horror that echoed through the cave.

Real World

"Wait. So, the theme park was at a studio?" Yang asked.

"I thought it was here?" Nora asked, confused.

"Well, yes and no." Marty answered.

"Remember, streets can be pretty long. And a good portion of it ran through the studio." Erin added.

"But the best and main rides were located on this street."

"Exactly eight miles and fourteen attractions. Seven were rides, four were haunted houses, and three were performances." Penny said.

"Um. How do you know that?" Coco asked.

"I have all the data regarding Shock Street, the events that happened here, and the people who currently live here. I downloaded it from one of the few remaining computers that were being transported to Jaune's hometown, Artakha." Penny explained.

"Artakha?" Everyone else asked, confused.

"The native name for my hometown. We don't know the name of the language, but it roughly translates to 'The Great Refuge.'" Jaune explained.

"Which is fitting, considering a lot of creatures go there for safety and to escape." Erin said.

"Escape from what?" Ruby asked.

"Most creatures are friendly." Jaune said before pointing to the Ghost Dog that fell asleep. "But some, as you can see with the Ghost Dog, are not so friendly."

"And most creatures just want to be left alone, so they move to safe places like Jaune's hometown." Erin said.

"And others are escaping from others." Marty added, careful not to say who or what. "Or are simply escaping their past."

"So kind of like Menagerie in a sense." Blake said.

"In a sense." Jaune agreed.

"But what of Linda and the others like her?" Ren asked. "Were they people, creatures, or andoids?"

"Oh. Linda left a few days after our creator failed to 'repair us.' And she was a human. But we don't know where she went." Erin answered.

"As for the others, they were also human. But they left soon after since they were no longer getting paid. But before you ask, no. They didn't know what was happening behind the scenes." Marty added.

"Does that include the monsters that were a part of the tour/ride?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"No. All except two were also androids. And those two left as well, but for different reasons, which were better-paying jobs." Erin answered.

"What about the studio? Is it still there?" Weiss asked.

"Or was it torn down?" Velvet asked.

"It was torn down and converted into a massive mall that has basically everything in it." Marty answered.

"Including for creatures like wolves, vampires, etc.?" Pyrrha asked, curious.

"Yup. They even have things that can stop werewolves from transforming at inopportune times."

"They also sell things that let vampires keep their powers despite being in direct sunlight. And special clothes for other creatures. And that's just the tip of the iceberg." Erin added.

"But anyone can enter, right?" Pyrrha asked.

"Yup. Anyone can enter. Although, there is something that will, in a sense, scan you to see if you're a normal human, faunus, or something else." Marty answered.

"Okay."

"Anyway. Let's continue with the story. After Marty screamed, I asked him what was wrong. But he couldn't say anything as his eyes bulged out of his head while his tongue hung out of his mouth. But after a moment, he finally answered." Erin said.

Story

"Yuck!" I cried. His worm was nearly as long as a shoelace!

We both tossed our worms out of the tram. But then I felt a soft, damp plop on my shoulder. And then a cold plop on top of my head. Another on my forehead, like a cold slap.

"Ohhh - help!" I said as I started thrashing my arms, grabbing the worms, struggling to pull them off me. "Marty - please!"

I turned to him for help. But he was battling them, too, twisting and ducking, trying to dodge, as more and more white worms fell from the ceiling. I saw one fall on his shoulder and another wrap itself around his ear. As fast as I could, I pulled the sticky, wet creatures off me and tossed them over the side of the slow-rolling tram. I wondered where they were all coming from. I glanced up, and a fat, wet one fell over my eyes.

"YUCK!" I shouted before grabbing the worm and throwing it away.

The tram turned sharply, sending us both sliding over the seat. The cave narrowed again as we entered a different tunnel. The silvery light glowed dimly around us as we bounced forward. Two white worms, each at least a foot long, wriggled across my lap. I tugged them off and heaved them over the tram. Breathing hard, I searched for more. My whole body itched. The back of my neck tingled. I couldn't stop shaking.

"They stopped falling." Marty said in a shaky voice.

Then why did I still itch? I rubbed the back of my neck as I stood up and searched the seat, then the floor. I found one last worm, climbing over my shoe. I kicked it away, then dropped back onto the seat with a loud sigh.

"That was totally gross!" I wailed.

"I guess that's why they call it The Cave of The Living Creeps." Marty said, combing his hair with his fingers.

"Those disgusting white worms - do you think they were alive?" I asked, shivering. Even though the worms were gone, I could still feel them.

"Of course not. They were fakes." Marty said, shaking his head. "I guess they fooled you, huh?"

"They sure felt real. And the way they wriggled around-"

"They were robots or something. Everything here is fake. It has to be."

"I'm not so sure." I said, my whole body still itchy and tingling.

"Well, just ask your father." Marty said, annoyed.

I had to laugh. I knew why Marty was suddenly so grouchy. Whether the worms were real or fake, they had scared him. And he knew that I knew that he had been frightened.

"I don't think little kids will like the worms. I think they'll get too scared. I'm going to tell your dad that." Marty said.

I was about to reply but stopped when I felt something drop all over me. Something scratchy and dry. It covered my face, my shoulders - my entire body. I shot both hands up and tried to push it away. I thought that it was some kind of net. I grabbed at it, desperate to get it off my face. As I struggled to remove it, I turned and saw Marty squirming as he tried to do the same. The tram bounced through the dim cave tunnel. The sticky net felt like cotton candy on my skin.

"It - it's a big spiderweb!" Marty said. I tugged and grabbed and pulled. But the sticky threads clung to my face, arms, and clothes.

"Yuck! This is so gross!" I choked out. And then I saw the black dots scurrying through the net. It took me a few seconds to realize what they were. Spiders! Hundreds of them! "Ohhhh."

I batted the spiderweb with both hands. I rubbed my cheeks frantically, trying to scrape away the sticky threads. I pulled a spider off my forehead and another one off the shoulder of my T-shirt.

"The spiders - they're in my hair!" Marty shouted.

Marty suddenly forgot about acting cool. He began raking his hair with both hands, slapping himself in the head, pinching and swiping at the spiders. As the tram rolled silently on, we both twisted and

squirmed, struggling to flick away the black spiders. I pulled three of them out of my hair. Then I felt one climb into my nose! I opened my mouth in a horrified scream - and sneezed it out. Marty plucked a spider off my neck and sent it soaring through the air. But the last spider, I couldn't feel or see anymore. We both dropped down in the seat, breathing hard. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Still think everything is a fake?" I asked.

"I-I don't know." He answered. "The spiders could be puppets, maybe. You know. Radio-controlled."

"They were real! Face it, Marty! They were real! This is The Cave of The Living Creeps - and they were living!"

"You really think so?" Marty asked, eyes going wide.

"They had to be real spiders." I said, nodding.

"That's so cool! Real spiders! That is totally cool!"

I let out a long sigh and slumped lower in the seat. I didn't think it was cool at all. I thought it was creepy and disgusting. These rides are supposed to be fake. That's what makes them fun. I decided to tell my dad that the worms and spiders were too scary. He should get rid of them before the studio tour opens to the public. I crossed my arms in front of me and kept my eyes straight ahead. I wondered what we would run into next. I hoped there weren't any other disgusting insects waiting to fall on us and climb all over our faces and bodies.

"I think I hear the bats!" Marty teased, leaning close to me, grinning. "Hear those fluttering sounds? Giant vampire bats!"

"When do we get out of this cave?" I asked impatiently as I shoved him back to his seat. I wasn't in the mood for joking around. "This isn't any fun."

"I think it's cool. I like exploring caves."

The narrow tunnel opened into a wide cavern. The ceiling appeared to be a mile high. There were giant rocks scattered over the cavern floor. Rocks piled on rocks. There were rocks everywhere. Somewhere ahead of us, I heard water dripping.

Plunk! Plunk! Plunk!

"Now what?" I whispered as eerie green light glowed from the cave walls. The tram pulled up to the back wall and then stopped. Marty and I turned in our seats, letting our eyes explore the huge cavern. All I could see were rocks: Smooth rocks, some round, some square.

Plunk! Plunk! Plunk!

"This is kind of boring." Marty murmured as water dripped somewhere to our right. The air suddenly felt cold and damp."When do we get going?"

"I don't know. Why did we stop here? It's just a big empty cave." I answered, shrugging. We waited for the tram to back up and take us out of there.

And we waited.

And we waited.

And we waited.

Then we waited some more.

A few moments went by. Then, another few minutes. We both turned around and got up on our knees, peering at the back of the tram. Nothing moved. We listened to the steady drip of water echoing off the high stone walls. But aside from that, there were no other sounds.

"Hey - can anybody hear us?" I shouted while cupping my hands around my mouth.

No reply.

"Can anybody hear us?" I tried again. "I think we're stuck here!"

Nothing.

Just the steady drip drip drip of water.

We waited, squinting hard into the glow of green light. Why wouldn't the tram get moving? Did it break down? Were we really stuck here?

"What's up with this tram? Do you think we're - HEY!" I asked before gasping when I realized the seat next to me was empty. I reached both hands out to try and grab Marty. But there was nothing. Was it Another lighting trick? Another optical illusion? "Marty? Hey - Marty?"

I felt a cold shiver go down my spine when realization hit me like a speeding truck. Marty was really gone this time. I was all alone in this creepy, unsettling place.

"Marty?" I asked before a scraping sound caused me to jump. I spun around and saw Marty grinning at me from the cave floor.

"Gotcha." Marty said, smirking.

"You creep!" I shouted, swinging my fist at him. But Marty effortlessly dodged out of the way, laughing all the while. "You're The Living Creep! You deliberately tried to scare me."

"It isn't too hard a job!" He said. But his smile faded a second later. "I climbed down to check things out."

"But the tram might start up any second! You know what that tour guide told us. She said we should never leave the tram."

"Yeah, I know. But I think the tram is stuck or something. Maybe it came off its tracks." Marty said as he kneeled and examined the tires. He raised his eyes to me and shook his head fretfully. "But there aren't any tracks."

"Marty - get back in. If it starts up and leaves you standing there-" I pleaded but stopped when Marty grabbed the side of the car with both hands and shook it. The tramcar bounced on its tires. But it didn't move.

"I think it broke down." Marty said softly. "Your father said that some things might not work."

"You mean we're stranded here? All by ourselves in this creepy cave?" I asked, fear and dread creeping into my heart.

Marty stepped to the front of the car and squeezed between the tram and the cave wall. Then he tried to push the tram back, shoving with both hands as hard as he could. But it wouldn't budge.

"Oh, wow. This is horrible. This isn't any fun at all." I said, shaking my head. Breathing out, I got back on my knees and tried to get someone's attention again. "Is anybody in here? Does anybody work here? The tram is stuck!"

Plunk! Plunk! Plunk!

The dripping water was my only reply.

"Can somebody help us?" I shouted. "Please! Can somebody help?"

No answer.

"Now what?" I asked. Marty was still shoving against the front of the tram with all his might. He gave one last hard push, then gave up with a sigh.

"You'd better climb down." Marty said. "We have to walk."

"Huh? Walk? In this creepy dark cave? No way, Marty!"

"You're not afraid - are you, Erin?" Marty said, walking to my side of the car.

"Yes, I am. A little." I answered, glancing around the massive, dark cave. "I don't see any exits. We'd have to walk back through those tunnels. With all the spiders and worms and everything."

"We can find a way out." Marty insisted. "There's got to be a door somewhere. They always build emergency exits in these theme park rides."

"I think we should stay in the tram." I said uncertainly. "If we stay here and wait, someone will come and find us."

"It could take days." Marty said. "Come on, Erin. I'm going to walk. Are you coming with me?"

"No way. I'm staying here." I insisted, crossing my arms. I knew he wouldn't go off by himself. I knew he wouldn't go unless I joined him.

"Well. Bye then." Marty said. He turned and started walking quickly across the cave floor.

"Hey, Marty?"

"Bye. I'm not waiting here all day. See you later." He was really leaving! He was leaving me alone in the stalled tram, in the scary cave.

"But, Marty - wait!"

"Are you coming or not, Erin?" Marty impatiently asked.

"Okay, okay." I murmured. I saw that I had no choice. I climbed over the side of the tram and dropped to the cave floor. The dirt was smooth and damp. I started walking slowly toward Marty.

"Hurry it up. Let's get out of here." Marty called. He was walking backward now, motioning for me to catch up to him. But I stopped, and my mouth dropped open in horror. "Don't look at me like that! Don't stare at me as if I'm doing something wrong!"

But I wasn't staring at Marty.

I was staring at the thing creeping up behind Marty!

"Th . . . uh . . . uh . . . " I struggled to warn Marty, but only frightened grunts escaped my throat. He kept backing up, backing right into the enormous creature.

"Erin, get a move on. What's your problem?" Marty demanded.

"Uh... uh... uh..." I finally managed to point.

"Huh?" Marty spun around and saw it, too. He immediately screamed before running back to me. "Whoa! What is that thing?"

At first, I thought it was some kind of machine. It looked like one of those tall steel cranes you see on construction sites. All silvery and metallic. But as it rose up on its wire-thin back legs, I saw that it was alive! It had round black eyes the size of billiard balls. They spun wildly in their skinny silver skulls. Two slender antennae bobbed at the top of the head. Its mouth appeared soft and mushy. A gray tongue darted out between long, bristly whiskers. Its long body stretched back like a folded-un leaf. As it stood, it waved its front legs, short white sticks.

The whole creature looked like some kind of gross stick figure. Its long back legs bent and sprang forward, bent then sprang forward. The thick tongue swung from side to side. The black eyes stopped whirling and focused on me.

"Is it - is it a grasshopper?" I choked out.

Marty and I had both backed up to the tram. Waving its stick arms, the creature sprang closer, its antennae circling slowly on top of its head. Marty and I pressed our backs against the cold cave wall. We couldn't move back any farther.

"I think it's a praying mantis," Marty said, staring up at it.

The insect had to be at least three times as tall as us. As it moved forward, its head nearly scraped the cave ceiling. The tongue licked its soft, mushy mouth. The mouth puckered and made loud sucking sounds. My stomach lurched. The sound was so sick! The round black eyes stared down at Marty and me. The giant praying mantis, its body shining like aluminum, took another hopping step toward us. It started to lower its head.

"Wh-what's it going to do?" I stammered, pressing my back hard against the cave wall. To my surprise, Marty suddenly started to laugh. I turned to him and grabbed his shoulder. Was he totally losing it? "Marty - are you okay?"

"Of course!" Marty answered. He pulled away from me and took a step toward the towering insect. "Why should we be scared, Erin? It's a big robot. It's programmed to walk up to the tram."

"Huh? But, Marty-"

"It's all on a computer. It isn't real. It's part of the ride."

"It's... uh... really lifelike." I murmured, staring up at the creature. Big drops of saliva rolled off its fat tongue and hit the cave floor with a splat.

"Your dad is a genius at this stuff!" Marty shouted. "We'll have to tell him what a good job he did on the praying mantis. Your dad said there were still some bugs, remember? This must be one of them!"

The insect rubbed its front legs together. It made a shrill whistling sound. I covered my ears. The high-pitched note made my ears

ache! I was still holding my ears as a second giant praying mantis hopped out from behind a tall rock.

"Look! Another one!" Marty cried, pointing as he tugged my arm. "Wow. They move so smoothly. You can't even tell that they're machines."

The two silvery insects chittered at each other, a sharp, shrill, metallic sound. Their black eyes twirled. Their antennae rotated rapidly, excitedly. Gobs of saliva rolled off their tongues and splattered to the floor. The second one flashed silvery wings on its back, then quickly closed them up again.

"Great-looking robots! We'd better get back in the tram. It'll probably start up again now that we've seen these giant bugs." Marty said, turning to me. The two insects chittered to each other. They hopped closer, their sticklike legs springing hard, bouncing off the smooth cave floor.

"I hope you're right. Those insects are too real. I want to get out of here!" I said as we headed to the tramcar. The first mantis leaped forward quickly. It hopped between us and the tram, blocking our path. We tried to go around it, but it took a big hop to stay in front of us. "Hey! It - it won't let us pass!"

The big creature suddenly swung down and slammed its head against my chest, sending me to the floor.

"Hey! Stop that!" Marty shouted as he helped me up. "That machine must be broken!"

Its black eyes glowing, the mantis lowered its head again and gave me another hard push toward the center of the cave. Its partner moved quickly to trap Marty. It lowered its body and prepared to head-butt Marty. But Marty promptly backed away, raising his hands in front of him like a shield. He hurried to join me. I heard scraping sounds, shrill chirps, and chittering.

I spun around to discover two more huge, ugly mantises climbing out from behind rocks. Then two more, their antennae twisting excitedly. Their fat gray tongues rolled around their open mouths. Marty and I huddled together in the middle of the cavern as the creatures hopped and scraped around us. Then they rose up high on their hind legs, their black eyes gleaming, their short stick arms waving.

"We - we're surrounded!" I cried.

The giant insects all began chittering at once. They scraped their front legs together excitedly. The shrill whistle rose through the cave, echoing off the stone walls. They formed a circle around us, leaning back on their spindly hind legs as they moved closer, tightening the circle. Their tongues whipped back and forth as thick gobs of mantis saliva hit the floor.

"They're out of control!" Marty shrieked.

"What are they going to do to us?" I cried, covering my ears against their excited chirps and the deafening whistle.

"Maybe they are voice-controlled." Marty shouted. He tilted back his head and shouted up at them: "Stop! Stop!"

They didn't stop. One of them tilted its silvery head, opened its ugly mouth wide, and spit out a black gob. It splattered onto Marty's sneaker. He jumped back. His sneaker stuck to the floor. He struggled to tug it free.

"Yuck! Watch out!" Marty shouted. "That black stuff - it's like glue!"

THOOOM!

Another mantis opened its mouth wide and spat out a big black gob of sticky goo. It splotched the shoulder of my T-shirt.

"Oww!" I wailed.

It was so hot that it burned me right through my shirt. The others chittered shrilly and scraped their hairy stick arms. Their tongues darting back and forth, they began to lower their heads to us.

"The stun guns!" I cried, grabbing Marty's arm. "Maybe the guns will work against these bugs!"

"Those guns are only toys!" he wailed.

THUPPP!

Another black gob missed Marty's foot by inches.

"Besides, the guns are in the tram." Marty continued, staring up at the ugly creatures. "No way they'll let us get to the tram."

"Then what are we going to do?" I cried. As I asked the question, an idea flashed into my mind. "Marty. How do you normally get rid of bugs?"

"Huh? Erin, what are you talking about?"

"You step on them, right? Don't you usually step on them?"

"But, Erin. These bugs are big enough to step on us!"

"It's worth a try!"

I raised my foot and tromped as hard as I could on the foot of the nearest mantis. The giant insect let out a shrill hiss and hopped backward. Beside me, Marty stomped on another insect, bringing the heel of his sneaker down hard on its spindly foot. That creature fell back, too, raising its head in a shrill hiss of pain. Its eyes spun wildly. Its antennae shot straight up. I stomped down hard again. With a hoarse choking sound, the big mantis fell onto its side. All four stick legs thrashed in the air.

"Let's go!" I shouted.

I turned and burst through the circle of insects. I didn't know where to run. I only knew I had to get away. The cave erupted in hisses and shrill whistles, angry chittering, and croaks. I glimpsed at Marty, who lurched after me.

I ignored the echoing, ringing sounds and ran to the tram. Leaning over the side, I grabbed both plastic stun guns. Then I pushed away from the tram and hurtled along the stone cave wall. Where could I go? How could I escape? The chittering and hissing grew louder, more frantic. The tall shadows of the giant insects danced on the wall as I ran. I had the feeling that the shadows could reach out and grab me.

I glanced back. Marty came running behind me at full speed. The mantises were hopping, scrabbling, limping across the dirt floor after us. Where to run? Where?

And then I saw the narrow opening in the cave wall. Just a crack, really. But I dove for it, slipped into it, and squeezed myself into the dark hole between the stone. After a moment, I burst out the other side and into the misty daylight.

Outside!

I could see trees tilting down the hill. The road that led down to the studio buildings. Yes! Outside! I made it! I felt so happy. So safe. But I didn't have long to enjoy the feeling. As I started to catch my breath, I heard Marty's terrified cry: "Erin - help! Help! They got me! They're eating me!"

With a gasp, I spun around. How could I help Marty? How could I get him out of the cave? To my surprise, he was leaning against the cave wall, one elbow against the rock; his legs crossed with a big grin on his round face.

"April Fools." Marty said.

"YAAAIIIII!" I let out an angry scream. Then I dropped the two plastic pistols and rushed at him, ready to pound him with my fists. But he dodged each of my attacks. "You jerk! You scared me to death! Don't play any more dumb jokes like that! This place is too scary! Those big insects-"

"Yeah. They were scary." Marty agreed, his smile fading. "They were so real! How do you think they made them spit like that?"

"I don't know." I muttered, shaking my head.

I had a heavy feeling in my stomach. I knew it was a crazy idea. But I was beginning to think these creatures we were seeing were real. Maybe I've seen too many scary movies. But the big praying mantises, the white worms, and all the other creatures and monsters really seemed to be alive. They didn't move like mechanical creatures. They appeared to breathe. And their eyes focused on Marty and me as if they could really see us. I wanted to tell Marty what I was thinking. But I knew he would only laugh at me.

He was so sure that they were all robots and that we were seeing some awesome movie special effects. Of course, that made sense. We were on a movie studio tour, after all. I hoped Marty was right. I hoped it was all tricks. Movie magic. My dad was a genius when it came to designing mechanical creatures and building theme park rides. And maybe that's all we were seeing. Maybe Dad had really outdone himself this time. But the heavy feeling in my stomach wouldn't go away. I had the feeling that we were in danger. Real danger.

I had the feeling that something had gone wrong here. That something was out of control. I suddenly wished we weren't the first two kids to try out the tour. I knew it was supposed to be a thrill to be the only ones here. But it was too quiet. Too empty. Too scary. It would be so much more fun if hundreds of other people were along with us.

I wanted to tell Marty all this. But how could I? He was so eager to prove that he was braver than me. So eager to prove that he wasn't afraid of anything. I couldn't tell him what I was really thinking. I picked up the two plastic stun guns and handed him one. I didn't want to carry them both. He tucked the barrel of his gun into his jeans pocket.

"Hey, Erin - look where we are!" Marty cried. He jogged past me, his eyes straight ahead. "Check it out!"

He started running across the grass. I turned and started to follow him. I didn't want him to get too far ahead. The sky had darkened. The sun had disappeared behind a heavy blanket of clouds. Wisps of gray fog hung low in the cool air. It was nearly evening. We crossed the road and stepped into a town. I mean, it was a movie set of a town. A small town with low, one- and two-story buildings, small shops, a country-looking general store. Big, old houses in the block beyond the stores.

"Do you think this is a set they really use in the movies?" I asked, hurrying to catch up to Marty.

"Don't you recognize it? Don't you know where you are?" Marty asked, his dark eyes flashing with excitement.

And then my eyes fell on the crumbling, old mansion half-hidden by the twisted trees. And across from it, I saw the crooked picket fence that ran around the old cemetery. And I knew we were on Shock Street.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, spinning around, trying to take it all in at once. "This really is Shock Street. This is where they filmed all of the movies!"

"It doesn't look the way I imagined it." Marty said. "It looks even scarier!"

He was right. As the sky darkened to evening, long shadows fell over the empty buildings. The wind made a moaning sound as it swept around the corner. Marty and I made our way down the street, trying to see everything. We kept crossing from side to side, peering into a dark, dust-covered shop window - then running to examine the front yard of a rundown, old mansion.

"Check out that empty lot." I said, pointing. "That's where The Mad Mangler hung out. Remember? In Shocker III? Remember, he mangled everyone who walked by?"

"Of course, I remember." Marty snapped. He stepped into the empty lot. Tall weeds bent low, blown by the moaning wind. Shadows moved against the fence at the back. I stayed on the sidewalk and squinted hard, trying to see what cast the shadows. Did The Mad Mangler still lurk back there? The lot was totally empty. So how could there be tall, shifting shadows on the fence?

"Marty. Come back," I pleaded. "It's getting dark."

"Scared, Erin?" Marty asked, turning back to me.

"It's just an empty lot. Let's keep walking."

"People always thought it was just an empty lot." Marty replied in a low, scary voice. "Until The Mad Mangler jumped out and mangled them!"

"Marty. You're losing it," I murmured, shaking my head.

"I wish I had a camera." Marty said as we crossed the street. "I'd really like a picture of me standing in The Mangler's lot. Or even better-!"

He didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he took off, running full speed.

"Hey - wait up!" I cried. A few seconds later, I saw where he was headed.

The old cemetery.

"Even better, I'd like a photo of me standing in the cemetery. The

cemetery where they filmed Cemetery on Shock Street." Marty said as He ran up to the cracked and peeling wooden gate and turned back to me.

"We don't have a camera. Get away from there." I called from the street. He ignored me and started to open the gate. The bottom was stuck in the grass. Marty tugged hard. Finally, the gate began to pull open, creaking and groaning as it moved. "Marty - let's go. It's getting late. Dad is probably waiting for us, wondering what happened to us."

"But this is part of the tour!" Marty insisted. He tugged the heavy gate open just wide enough to squeeze inside the cemetery.

"Marty! Please! Don't go in!" I begged as I ran up beside him.

"Erin, it's just a movie set." He said. "You didn't used to be such a total wimp!"

"I-I just have a bad feeling about this cemetery." I stammered. "A very bad feeling."

"It's part of the tour!"

"But this gate was closed! It was closed so that people didn't go in. I have such a bad feeling ..." I raised my eyes to the cemetery. I saw the old graves tilting up from the ground like crooked teeth. Marty ignored me. He tugged the gate open a little wider and slipped into the cemetery. "Marty - please!"

I gripped the low fence tightly with both hands and watched him. He took three steps toward the old graves. Then his hands shot straight up in the air - and he dropped out of sight. I was about to rush to see if he was alright but stopped when I heard a loud clunk.

"OW!" Marty shouted in pain. I was about to step closer to see what he had hit but stopped again when an unfamiliar voice spoke up.

"Salutations! Do you require any assistance?"

Real World

"Did he need any help?" Yatsuhashi asked, with everyone chuckling while Marty groaned.

"No. Marty did not require any assistance. Initial scans showed that Marty suffered no injuries aside from a small bump on his head, with the receptors in his system telling him that he hurt his head." Penny answered.

"And my ego." Marty added.

"But I take it you learned a valuable lesson." Summer said, chuckling.

"Yup. Always look before you do anything."

"Wait. I thought you hadn't met Marty or Erin or even come here until you met Jaune when he came here." Coco said, confused.

"No. We first *met* two years later when I came here. But Penny first arrived here two years earlier." Jaune explained.

"And this was the first time we met Penny. Granted, most other ways would have been better." Erin added.

"Yeah." Marty agreed.

"Still, we're glad to have met her."

"I am also glad to have met Friend Marty and Friend Erin." Penny said.

"And to think, a great friendship would have been avoided if Marty listened to Erin or spotted the closed sign on the gate." Jaune said.

"Even if I saw it, I would have said what the girl said about how a sign won't stop her because she can't read." Marty said.

"But what were you doing there, Penny? I thought you were supposed to be in Atlas." Weiss asked.

"Apologies, but that information is classified. All I can divulge is that we were testing something that accidentally sent me to the cemetery. But there is no need for concern. Aside from some slight disorientation, I was okay." Penny answered.

"That's good." Ruby said.

"But was all of that part of the ride? The praying mantises, the worms, and having to escape that way." Blake asked.

"Because that did not seem safe." Velvet added.

"Yeah. I'm sure that if any huntsmen or huntsmen-in-training were there, they would have broken the machines. I know I would have." Yang said.

"Surprisingly, only the worms were the ones that didn't work as intended. They were supposed to be lowered to the floor and slowly crawl to us to distract us from the praying mantises." Marty answered.

"Well, if that is the case, then they should have some lawyers and backup andorids on standby. That is if they were still around." Nora sad.

"Yeah. After... everything started changing, we realized how much of a death trap the place was. We know it was still not ready for the public, but still. They would have been lucky if they lasted a few months before filing for bankruptcy from all the lawsuits."

"Anyway. Back to the story." Erin said. "After helping Marty out, we found out that he landed on Penny. We then helped her out, exchanged names, and talked a bit. After that, Marty exclaimed how he was going to brag to others about this while I wanted to find a way out of the theme park."

Story

"That was cool!" Marty exclaimed.

"Indeed it was." Penny agreed, despite not knowing how it was cool.

"Now I can tell people I was in a grave in The Shock Street Cemetery."

"Is it an honor or considered cool when falling into a grave with the intent to scare your sister?" Penny asked, confused.

"We're not siblings." Marty and I said.

"And it's to make people jealous that I was one of the first ones here." Marty said.

"Will you also be telling them that you blindly fell into a grave?" Penny asked.

"Uh, no. They would think I'm an idiot."

"You won't, but I will." I said, smirking, not passing up on an excellent opportunity to get some revenge on Marty.

"Don't you dare." Marty exclaimed.

"We'll see by the end." I said, laughing. "Anyway. How did you get here? I thought we were supposed to be the only ones here aside from the workers."

"I do not know. One moment, I was helping my father and his assistants with a project, and the next, I was here. I then tried to find

someone but got sidetracked when I detected strange energy readings coming from the grave and decided to investigate. But nothing conclusive came up from my investigation." Penny answered, confusing Marty and me.

"Um. Okay. Well. Hopefully, you find what you're looking for next time." I said, confused. But I shivered when the wind started to pick up. "Let's get out of here."

"Do you two mind if I join? I would like some company as I try to find my way out of here and back to my father." Penny asked.

"Um. Sure. We're trying to find a way out of the place anyway." Marty answered.

"Just be careful. Somethings here seem too real and look like they could hurt you." I said.

"Don't worry. I am combat-ready." Penny assured.

"If you say so." I said, not really paying attention as my focus was on something gray that floated silently between two old gravestones. What is a wisp of fog? A gray cat?

"Check out these graves." Marty said, still brushing dirt off his jeans. "They're all cracked and faded. I can barely read the names. That's so cool. And look how they sprayed cobwebs over that row of stones. Creepy, huh?"

"Do cobwebs and faded names make everything creepy?" Penny asked.

"Not really. It can work only in the correct setting, like a graveyard or abandoned house. Everywhere else, it comes off as cheesy."

"What does cheese have to do with it?"

"Uh, nothing. Anyway. Can we please go? Dad is probably worried by now. And maybe the tram started working again." I begged. Marty

ignored me. I watched him lean over a tombstone to read the words cut into it.

"Jim Socks. Eighteen forty to eighteen eighty-seven. Jim Socks. Get it? And look at the ones next to it. Ben Dover. Sid Upp. These are all funny!" Marty said, laughing. Even though they were a little cheesy, I laughed, too.

"Do all people from an earlier time have such funny names?" Penny asked.

"No. These are fake names." Marty answered.

But the moment was cut short when I heard a soft cry from the back of the graveyard. I saw another gray wisp dart behind a tombstone. I held my breath and listened hard. The wind whistled through the tall grass. Rising above the wind came another shrill cry. A cat? Is the cemetery filled with cats? Or is it a child? It seemed like Marty and Penny heard it, too. Marty moved down the row of stones until he was next to me, while Penny stayed still.

"This is so cool. Did you hear the sound effects? There must be a speaker hidden in the ground." Marty said.

"It would be cool. But my sensors indicate it is not coming from the ground." Penny said, confusing us further.

"Sensor?" Marty asked.

"Where is it coming from?" I asked as we heard another shrill cry. This time, it was human-sounding. Definitely human. A girl?

"I do not know. My sensors are not working at one hundred percent capacity."

"Marty, I really think we should try to get back to my dad. We've been here all afternoon. And -"

"But what about the rest of the tour? We have to see everything!" Marty argued as we heard another cry. This time, it was louder and closer. It sounded like a cry of terror.

"I do not think it is wise to stay. We best be leaving." Penny said.

"See. Penny agrees with me. Let's get going." I said. Even though Marty was probably right, and the cries were probably coming from a loudspeaker, something was just not right about this place. "How can we finish the tour? We were supposed to stay on the tram - remember?"

"What tram?" Penny asked.

"The tram that brought us here. It broke down. But maybe the tram- OHH!" I began before crying out as a hand shot out from the ground before us. It was green with long, unfolded fingers. It was moving as if trying to grab us.

"Whoa!" Marty cried, stumbling back.

Another green hand shot up from the dirt. Then, two more. Hands reaching up from graves. I let out a frightened gasp. Hands were bursting up through the grass. There were hands all around us. Their fingers twisting and arching, reaching out.

"This is totally awesome! Just like in the movie!" Marty said, laughing. He stopped laughing as a hand poked up beside him and grabbed his ankle. "Erin! Help!"

But I couldn't help. Two green hands had wrapped around my ankles and were pulling me down! *Down into the grave!*

"Come dowwwwwnnnnn!" A soft voice moaned. " ***Come dowwwwwnnnn with us."***

"Nooo!" I shrieked. "PENNY! HELP!

"On it." Penny said before either stomping or hitting the hands. For a moment, I wondered if this was what she meant if she was combat-ready. And if it was, then that would mean everyone was combat-ready. But I couldn't dwell on it as my arms thrashed around in the air.

I tried to kick, but the hands gripped me so tightly, so firmly. My whole body frantically jerked and tilted back and forth as I struggled not to fall. If I fell, I knew they would grab my hands, too. And pull me facedown into the ground.

"Come dowwwwwwnnnnnnn. Come dowwwwwnnnn with us!"

'This isn't a joke!' I thought. These hands are real. They are really trying to pull me underground.

"I got you, Erin." Penny said as she forced the hands off my legs.

"Thank you, Penny." I said, relief coursing through my veins.

"HELP! OH, HELP!" Marty shouted.

"Don't worry, Marty. We're coming." I said as we rushed over to him while two more hands grabbed his wrists.

"Come dowwwwwwnnnnnnn! Come dowwwwwnnnn with us!" The sad voice moaned.

"Not today." I said as Penny and I freed Marty.

"Thanks." Marty said.

"You're welcome. Now, take off your socks and shoes so they can't grab you as easily."

"Right."

"Should I do so as well?" Penny asked.

"Um." I began, about to say yes. But I decided it wasn't necessary as the hands had a hard time even grabbing her. And the ones that did quickly let go when Penny smacked or kicked them away. "No. You don't need to."

"Okay."

"Come dowwwwwwwnnnnnnn! Come dowwwwwnnnn with us!" The same voice moaned again.

"Come dowwwwwwwnnnnnnn! Come dowwwwwnnnn!" A dozen other soft voices called from beneath the ground. Marty and I froze. The soft, sad voices seemed to hypnotize me. My legs suddenly felt as if they were made of stone.

"Come dowwwwwwwnnnnnnn! Come dowwwwwnnnn!"

And then we saw a green head pop up from the dirt. And then another head. Another. Bald green heads with empty eye sockets and open, toothless mouths. We saw shoulders, then arms. More heads are poking up. Bright green bodies pulled up from beneath the ground.

"G-guys- They're coming up after us!" I choked out. And I nearly screamed when two tried to grab Marty and me. But before they could do so, Penny grabbed them and tossed them so far away that we could no longer see them.

"Do not harm my new friends." Penny said.

"Um. I think we should leave." I said as more hands and heads popped out of the ground.

The cemetery rang out with grunts and groans as the ugly green figures pulled themselves up from the ground. I took one last glance at their tattered, shredded clothing, at their blackened eye sockets, their toothless, grinning mouths. And then I started to run. Marty and I both ran without saying a word. But I had to run back, grab Penny,

and have her follow us when she stayed behind and started to fight off the skeletons with surprising ease.

Side by side, we darted across the tall grass between the rows of crooked tombstones. My heart thudded in my chest. My head throbbed. My bare feet sank into the cold dirt and slipped on the tall, damp grass. Marty reached the wooden gate first. He was running so hard he banged into the fence. He let out a cry before slipping through the gate onto Shock Street.

I could hear moans and groans and eerie calls of the disgusting green people behind me. But I didn't look back and focused on getting Penny and me to the gate. We dove for the gate and squeezed through. Then I shoved it shut behind me. Running into the street, we stopped to catch our breath. I bent over and pressed my hands against my knees. My side ached. I sucked in breath after breath.

"Are you alright, Friend Erin? Do you require medical assistance?" Penny asked.

"No. I'm fine. I just need to catch my breath." I answered, still panting.

"Do you want me to carry you to the tram or until you recatch your breath?"

"No. I-I'm good."

"Don't stop!" Marty cried frantically. "Erin! Penny! Keep going!"

I took a deep breath and followed him down the street. Our bare feet slapped the pavement. I could still hear the moans and calls behind us. But I was too scared to glance back.

"Marty. Where is everybody?" I asked.

Shock Street was empty; the houses and shops were all dark. Shouldn't there be people around? This is a big movie studio. Where are the people who work for Shocker Studios? Where are the people who work on the studio tour? Why isn't anyone around to help us?

"If this is a studio, as you two say, shouldn't there be guards and workers here?" Penny asked.

"Yes. But we have yet to see anyone here." I answered.

"That's why we feel like something is wrong!" Marty choked out, running at full speed. Yet, despite this, Penny was effortlessly keeping up with us.

'Maybe she is one of those athletes or huntsman-in-training I overheard some others talk about.' I thought. We soon passed The Horror Hardware Store and Shock City Electronics.

"The robots are out of control or something!" Marty said, running across the street to the next block of houses. At last! Marty agreed with me. He finally agreed that something was terribly wrong. "We've got to find your dad. We've got to tell him there's a problem."

"We have to find the tram. Ow!" I called, struggling to keep up with him. But I slowed down when my bare foot came down on something hard. It must have been a rock or something as pain shot up my leg. I would have kept going, but Penny picked me up and continued to run to keep up with Marty. I would have said something, but I could use the quick break. "If we can get back on the tram, it will take us back to Dad."

"There has to be a way out of Shock Street." Marty said. "It's only a movie set."

"Perhaps we could follow the tracks the tram used back to your father." Penny said.

"That would work if we can find it again." I said.

We ran past a tall mansion with two turrets. It looked like an evil castle. I didn't remember it from any of the Shocker movies. Beyond the mansion stretched a big, empty dirt lot. At the back of the lot stood a low brick wall, just a foot or two taller than us.

"Cut through here!" I told Marty and Penny. "If we can climb up on that wall, we can probably see the studio road."

"Okay." They said.

I was just guessing. But it was worth a try. We turned into the empty lot. And for a moment, I thanked Penny for carrying as I knew the dirt must have felt cold and wet. As we crossed the field, our feet tossed up big clumps of mud. We ran as fast as we could as the mud seemed to grow softer. Looking down, I saw that the cold mud rose up to Penny and Marty's ankles. It seemed like we were going to make it. Unfortunately, we ran into a sinkhole.

"Yaaaaaiiii!" We shouted as the ground gave way beneath us.

The mud made a sick splash as we sank. I tossed up both hands and tried to grab onto something. But there was nothing to grab. The mud oozed around us, over my ankles, my legs, and up over my knees.

'It's sucking us down.' I thought.

I tried to cry out again, but panic choked my throat. I glimpsed to Marty and Penny beside me. Marty's arms were waving wildly as his whole body twisted and squirmed as he sank. Penny seemed to be more collected as she focused on getting herself out, but without much luck. However, it seemed like she was trying to get something to work. And in any other situation, I would have asked what she was trying to do. Yet, I knew it would have to wait as the mud was now up to our waist. We were sinking fast.

I kicked hard, trying to raise my knees. But I was trapped. I was trapped and dropping down, down into the dark, wet ooze. My mud-

covered arms slapped against the surface. I couldn't stop myself. The mud bubbled up over my neck. And I was sinking fast.

I held my breath. The mud rose up to my chin. In a second, it will be over our heads. A sob escaped my throat. The mud crept higher, up over my chin. I started to spit as it reached my mouth. And then I felt something grab my arm. Strong hands slipped under my arms. I felt the hands slide in the mud. They gripped me harder. I felt myself being tugged up, tugged by someone very strong. For a moment, I thought it was Penny but remembered that she was trapped too. The mud made a loud plop as I rose up. I felt it roll down my chest, my legs, and my knees. And then I was standing on the surface, still held by the two powerful hands.

"Marty! Penny!" I called, tasting the sour mud on my lips. "Are you two -?"

"I'm up!" I heard his hoarse reply. "Erin, I'm okay!"

"I am okay, too, friends." Penny answered. The strong hands finally let go. My legs trembled. I wobbled but remained standing. I turned to see who had rescued me.

And stared into the glowing red eyes of a wolf!

A human with the face of a wolf. Clawed hands covered in black fur. A long brown snout curved in an open, toothy grin. Sharp, pointed ears above a thick tuft of black wolf fur. A female. She wore a silvery catsuit. Sleek and tight-fitting. As I stared in shock, she opened her mouth in a throaty growl. I recognized her at once.

Wolf Girl!

I turned to see her companion - Wolf Boy. He had pulled Marty and Penny out of the mud hole. Both their bodies were caked in mud. Marty tried to wipe his face but only managed to smear more mud over his cheeks.

"You - saved us! Thank you!" I cried, finally finding my voice. The two werewolves uttered low growls in reply. "We - we lost the tram. We need to get back."

"Do you know how to get there?" Penny asked. Wolf Girl let out a sharp growl. Then she snapped her toothy jaw hard.

"Please! Can you help us get back to the tram? Or can you take us to the main building? My dad is waiting for me there." I begged. Wolf Girl's red eyes flashed. She growled again.

"We know you're just actors!" Marty shouted. "But we don't want to be scared anymore. We've had enough scares for today. Okay?"

The two werewolves growled. A long white string of saliva drooled over Wolf Boy's black lips. Something inside me snapped. I totally lost it.

"Stop it!" I screamed. "Just stop it! Marty is right! We don't want to be scared now. So stop the werewolf act - and help us!"

The werewolves growled again. Wolf Girl snapped her jaws. A long pink tongue slid out, and she licked her jagged teeth hungrily.

"That's enough!" I shrieked. "Stop the act! Stop it! Stop it!"

I was so angry, so furious. I reached up with both hands and grabbed the fur on the sides of Wolf Girl's mask. And I tugged the mask with all my strength. I tugged, tugged, and tugged some more. The fur felt real, and the skin underneath was warm. It was then that I realized it wasn't a mask.

"Ohh." I gasped and jerked my hands away. The werewolf's red eyes glowed. Her black lips parted. Once again, her tongue flicked hungrily over her yellow, pointed teeth. My whole body trembled as I backed up against the brick wall.

"Is everything alright, Friend Erin?" Penny asked.

"G-guys. It's not an act."

"Huh?" Marty stood stiffly in front of Wolf Boy, his dark eyes wide in his mud-caked face.

"They're not actors. Something is wrong here. Something is terribly wrong."

Marty's mouth dropped open. He took a step back. Both werewolves uttered low growls. They lowered their heads as if preparing to attack. However, while Marty moved to stand next to me, Penny stood her ground. The wolves seemed to notice this and were slightly put off by her bravery.

"Do you believe me? Do you finally believe me?" I asked, earning a nod from Marty.

He didn't say a word. I think he was too terrified to talk. Saliva poured from the werewolves' mouths; their eyes glowed like fire in the darkness. Their furry chests began to heave in and out. Their breaths came loud and hoarse. I jumped back against the wall as both werewolves raised their heads and let out long, frightening howls. What were they going to do to us? I grabbed Marty and tugged him to the wall.

"Up!" I cried. "Get up! Maybe they can't reach us up there! PENNY HURRY!"

Marty leaped high, stretching up his arms. His hands slapped the top of the wall, then slid back down. He tried again. He bent his knees, jumped, grabbed the top of the wall, and slipped back down.

"I can't!" Marty shouted. "It's too high."

"We've got to!" I shrieked. I turned back and saw the two werewolves lean back on their hind legs and then spring up. They were snarling and growling now, thick gobs of saliva running over their snapping teeth.

"Let me help." Penny said, appearing next to us. And in one fell swoop, she picked both of us up and launched us into the air, where we landed on top of the brick wall.

"WOAH!" We shouted as we steadied ourselves. However, no sooner than we did, we turned around and helped Penny up.

"Thanks, Friends." Penny said.

"No. Thanks, Penny. You saved us." I said.

"Yeah. Thanks, Penny." Marty said.

But our attention shifted back to the wolves when we heard them snarling. Looking back down, we saw the werewolves leap again. Their jaws snapped in front of my face as their red eyes gleamed hungrily at me. The werewolves raised their heads in angry howls and prepared to attack again. We stood pressed close together, staring down at them. They jumped, and their claws scraped against the bricks. The shrill screech sent chills down my back. Their teeth snapped as they dropped down and prepared to leap again.

"We can't stay up here forever!" Marty cried. "What do we do?"

I squinted into the darkness. Was that the studio road on the other side of the wall? It was too dark to tell. The werewolves leaped again. Their jagged teeth scraped against my ankle. I jumped back and nearly toppled off the wall had Penny not grabbed me. But as I steadied myself, I suddenly remembered the guns we had. The plastic stun gun! Mine had fallen from my hand. It was probably buried in that mud hole. But my eyes fell on Marty's gun. Its handle poked out from his jeans pocket. Without saying a word, I grabbed the handle and tugged the plastic pistol from Marty's jeans.

"Hey!" Marty cried. "Erin! What are you doing?"

"They gave us the guns for a reason." I explained, shouting over the frightening howls of the two werewolves. "Maybe this will stop them."

"Wait. What guns do you have? Perhaps they could be of use since mine are currently malfunctioning." Penny asked.

"It-it's only a toy! They gave us a plastic toy gun. Linda said it would stun the monsters. But it's just a TOY!" Marty stammered.

I didn't care. It was worth a try. Maybe it would frighten them. Perhaps it would hurt them. Maybe it would chase them away. I raised the plastic gun and aimed it as the two werewolves made another leap of attack.

"Would you like me to aim? I have experience with weaponry." Penny offered.

"Um. Alright." I said. "But on my mark."

"Waiting."

"One -two - three - FIRE!"

Penny squeezed the trigger.

Again.

Again.

Again!

The gun made a loud buzzing sound. It shot out a beam of yellow light. Yes! I thought. Yes! I prayed. The light will stop them. It's a stun gun, right? The buzzing sound and the bright light will stun them. It will freeze them in place so we can make our escape. Penny squeezed the trigger hard.

Again.

Again.

It didn't stop the werewolves. It didn't even seem to surprise them. They leaped higher. I felt sharp claws scrape my leg. I cried out in pain.

"ERIN!" Marty and Penny shouted.

"I-I'm fine." I said through gritted teeth. Just a toy. Marty was right. It wasn't a real weapon. It was just a stupid toy.

"Look out!" Marty shouted as the snarling creatures made another high leap at the wall.

Claws scraped the brick and held on. Red eyes glared up at me. Hot wolf breath tingled my skin. My arms flew up as I lost my balance. I struggled to stay up. But my knees bent. My feet slipped. I grabbed for Marty or Penny but missed and toppled off and landed hard on my back on the other side of the wall.

Gazing up in horror, I saw Marty leap down beside me. Looking past him, I saw the two werewolves fighting Penny on top of the wall. And SHE WAS WINNING! After a moment, she managed to defeat the werewolves and push them off the wall and far away from us. However, the howls we heard later told us it was only temporary.

"Run!" Penny shouted as she jumped off the wall while Marty helped me up since I still felt a little dizzy from the fall.

"We-we can't outrun them!" I groaned.

I heard a rumbling sound followed by a clatter. We all turned and saw two yellow eyes glowing against the dark sky. Yellow eyes of a creature roaring toward us. No. Not a creature. As it drew nearer, I could make out its long, sleek shape.

The tram!

The tram bounced over the road behind yellow headlights.

It was coming closer. Closer.

Yes!

I turned to Marty and Penny. Did they see it, too? They did. Without saying a word, we began running to the road. The tram was rolling fast. Somehow, we had to climb on it. We had to! Behind us, I heard the werewolves howl. I heard a hard thump, then another as they dropped off the wall. The twin yellow headlights of the tram swept over us.

The werewolves snarled and howled angrily as they chased after us. A few feet ahead of me, Marty was hurtling forward, his head down, his legs pumping furiously. The tram bumped closer and closer. The howling werewolves were inches behind us. I could almost feel their hot breath on the back of my neck. A few more seconds. A few more seconds, and we would make our jump.

I watched the tram speed around a curve, the yellow headlights washing over the dark road. I kept my eyes on the front car. I took a deep breath and prepared to jump.

However, Marty suddenly fell. I saw his hands shoot out and his mouth hang open in surprise and horror as he landed on the ground. Penny and I couldn't stop in time. We ran right into him, stumbled over him, and fell on top of him. We then looked up and watched the tram speed past us.

Real World

"So, were those real werewolves?" Pyrrha asked.

"We don't know. Aside from that encounter, we never saw them again." Marty answered.

"I would have scanned them, but my scanners were not working properly." Penny said.

"Still. You saved us. I honestly think if it weren't for you, Penny, we wouldn't be here." Erin said, smiling.

"You're welcome."

"How many of your systems were done, Penny?" Ruby asked.

"I was working at forty percent. Most of my systems were damaged or not working properly." Penny answered.

"But you're back to one hundred percent now, right?" Summer asked, worried.

"Yes. My father repaired me. I am fully functioning now."

"That's good."

"It is. We would hate to lose a good friend." Erin said. "Anyway. We're almost done. After falling, we looked up and saw that the tram had multiple cars. I grabbed Penny and Marty and helped them to their feet before running after the tram. But it seemed like we wouldn't make it. However, Penny proved me wrong when she grabbed Marty and me and tossed us onto the tram before getting on herself."

Story

"Thanks, Penny." Marty panted.

"You're welcome." Penny said, smiling.

'Yes!' I thought happily.

We made it! We got away from those howling werewolves. Or did we? Would they jump into the tram after us? I spun around, my whole body trembling. And I watched the werewolves fade into the distance. They ran for a while, then gave up. They both stood in the road, hunched over in defeat, watching us escape.

Escape.

What a wonderful word.

Marty and I grinned at each other.

We were both breathing hard, covered in mud. Even though Penny had carried me for a bit, my legs still ached from all the running we did. My bare feet throbbed. My heart still thudded from the frightening chase. But we had escaped. And now we were safe in the tram, on our way back to the starting platform. Back to my dad. And hopefuly, we can find a way to get Penny back home.

"We've got to tell your dad that this place is messed up." Marty said breathlessly.

"Something is horribly wrong here." I agreed.

"Indeed. This place is strange and not adding up." Penny said.

"Those werewolves. They weren't kidding around." Marty continued. "They-they were real. They weren't actors."

I nodded. I felt so glad that Marty finally agreed with me. And he wasn't pretending to be brave anymore. He wasn't pretending that it was all robots and special effects. We all knew that we had faced real dangers.

Real monsters. And if it weren't for Penny, we might be dead. Something was terribly wrong at Shocker Studios. Dad had told us he wanted a full report. Well, he was going to get one! I settled back in the seat, trying to calm down. But I shot straight up again when I realized we weren't alone.

"Guys. Look!" I pointed to the front of the tram. "We aren't the only passengers."

In fact, every tramcar appeared to be filled with people!

"What's going on?" Marty murmured. "Your dad said we were the only ones on the tour. And now the tram is - OH!"

"Is something wrong, friends? Do you require medical-OH! I see." Penny said as Marty's mouth hung open.

The other passengers on the tram all turned around at the same time.

And I saw their grinning jaws, their dark, empty eye sockets, the gray bones of their skulls.

Skeletons.

The other passengers were all grinning skeletons.

Their jaws opened in dry laughter. Cruel laughter that sounded like the wind screeching through bare trees. Bones rattled and clattered as they raised their yellowed, skeletal hands to point at us.

Their skulls bobbed and bounced as the tram carried us, faster, faster, through the darkness. Marty and I slumped low in the seat, trembling, staring at the grinning skulls, the pointing fingers. Meanwhile, Penny seemed curious about the whole thing.

Who were the skeletons?

How did they get on this tram?

Where were they taking us?

The skeletons laughed their wheezing laugh. Their bones clanked and rattled. Their yellowed skulls bounced loosely on their clattering shoulder bones. The tram picked up speed. We were flying through the darkness.

I forced myself to turn away from the grinning skulls and peered out. Beyond the trees, I could see the low buildings of the movie studio. As I stared, they grew smaller and faded into the blackness of the night.

"Marty. Penny. We're not going back to the main platform." I whispered. "We're heading the wrong way. We're going away from all the buildings."

"I wonder where we are going." Penny said.

"What can we do?" Marty choked out with fear in his eyes.

"We've got to get off!" I answered. "We've got to jump."

Marty had slumped all the way down in the seat, as low as he could get. I think he was trying to hide from the skeletons. Now, he raised his head and peeked over the side of the tram.

"Erin! We can't jump!" Marty said. "We're going too fast."

He was right. We were rocketing along the road. And the tram kept picking up speed. The trees and shrubs whirred past in a dark blur. And then, as we squealed into a sharp curve, a tall building seemed to jump into our path. A castle bathed in swirling spotlights. All gray and silver. Twin towers reached up to the sky. A solid stone wall rose up from the road.

The road.

It curved straight into the castle wall. The road ended at the wall. And we were roaring down the road, still picking up speed, roaring toward the castle. The skeletons rattled and clattered and laughed their dry, screeching laugh. They bounced in their seats, bones cracking, jumping in excitement as we zoomed at the castle.

Closer. Closer.

Right up to it now. Up to the solid stone wall.

About to smash right into it.

My legs trembled. My heart pounded. But somehow, I managed to stand up on the seat. I took a deep breath and held it. I closed my

eyes and was about to jump when Penny stopped me.

"I have a better way." Penny said. She then grabbed Marty and me before jumping out of the tram and, miraculously, landing on her feet.

"Thanks, Penny." Marty and I said.

"You're welcome."

"What about the tram?" Marty asked. We turned to look to the castle in time to see the tram plunge into the stone wall. But it did so without a sound. The first tramcar hit the castle wall and flew through it.

Silently!

I could see the skeletons bobbing and bouncing. And I saw the next car and the next and the next - all shoot into the castle wall and disappear through it without making a sound. A few seconds later, the tram disappeared. A heavy silence fell over the road. The spotlights on the castle wall dimmed.

"Is everyone okay?" Marty weakly asked. I turned to find him on his hands and knees on the other side of the road. Penny seemed to be taking his pulse. I looked over myself and saw that aside from the scrape the werewolves gave me, I was fine.

"I'm alright. But is he alright, Penny?" I asked.

"He is alright. Friend Marty is only out of breath." Penny answered.

"Good. But did either of you see that?"

"The tram going through the castle wall, yes." Marty answered, standing up. "But I don't believe it. How did the tram go through the wall? Do you think the castle isn't really there? That it's an optical illusion? Some kind of trick?"

"There's an easy way to find out." I said.

"And what way would that be, Friend Erin?" Penny asked.

"To go and see for ourselves."

We walked side by side on the road. The wind rustled the trees, making them whisper all around us. The pavement felt cold under my bare feet.

"We've got to find my dad." I said quietly. "I'm sure he can explain everything to us."

"I hope so." Marty murmured.

We stepped up to the castle wall. I stuck out both hands, expecting them to go right through. But my hands slapped solid stone. Marty lowered his shoulder and shoved it against the castle wall. His shoulder hit the wall with a thud.

"It's solid." Marty said, shaking his head. "It's a real wall. So how did the tram go through it?"

"Perhaps a trap/secret door." Penny said.

"It's a ghost tram." I whispered, rubbing my hand against the cold stone. "A ghost tram filled with skeletons."

"But we rode in it!" Marty cried.

"I'm sick of mysteries!" I shouted, slapping the wall with both my hands. "I'm sick of being scared! I'm sick of werewolves and monsters! I'm never going to another scary movie as long as I live!"

"Your father can explain it all." Marty said softly, shaking his head. "I'm sure he can."

"I don't want him to explain it!" I cried. "I just want to get away from here!"

Keeping close together, we made our way around to the side of the castle. I could hear strange animal howls behind us. And a frightening cackle cut through the air somewhere above our heads. I ignored all the sounds. I didn't want to think about whether they were being made by real monsters or fakes. I didn't want to think about the frightening creatures we had run into or the close calls we had. I didn't want to think! At the back of the castle, the road appeared again.

"I hope we're going in the right direction." I murmured, following it as it curved into the hill.

"Me, too." Marty replied in a tiny voice.

"Me too. My father must be worried." Penny said.

We picked up our pace, walking quickly in the middle of the road. We tried not to pay attention to the sharp animal calls, the shrill cries, the howls and moans that seemed to follow us everywhere. The road sloped uphill. Marty and I leaned forward as we climbed. The frightening cries and howls followed us up the hill. As we neared the top, I saw several low buildings.

"Yes! Look! We must be heading back to the main platform." I shouted.

I started jogging toward the buildings. Marty and Penny trotted close behind. But we stopped when we realized where we were.

Back on Shock Street.

Somehow, we had made a circle. Past the old houses and small shops. The Shock Street Cemetery came into view. Staring at the fence, I remembered the green hands poking up from the ground. The green shoulders. The green faces. The hands pulling us, pulling us down.

My whole body shuddered.

I didn't want to be back here. I never wanted to see this terrifying street again. But I couldn't turn away from the cemetery. As I stared at the old gravestones from across the street, I saw something move. A wisp of gray. Like a tiny cloud. It rose up between two crooked, old stones and floated silently into the air.

And then another puff of gray lifted off the ground. And another. I glimpsed Marty and Penny. They stood beside me, hands pressed against their waists, staring hard. They saw them, too. The gray puffs rose silently, like snowballs or cotton. Dozens of them float up from the graves, floating over the cemetery and out over the street. Floating above us yet hovering so low.

And then, as we stared up at them, they started to grow, to inflate like gray balloons. And I saw faces inside them. Dark faces, etched in shadow like The Man in The Moon. The faces scowled at us. Old faces lined and creased. Eyes narrowed to dark slits. Frowning faces. Sneering faces inside the billowing, white puffs.

I grabbed Marty's and Penny's shoulder. I wanted to run, to get away, to get out from under them. But, like smoke, the wisps of mist with their evil faces swirled down, swirled around us. Trapped us. Trapped us inside.

The faces, the ugly, scowling faces, spinning around us. Spinning faster, faster, holding us in the swirling, choking mist. I pressed my hands over my eyes, trying to shut them out. I froze in total panic. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe. I could hear the shrill rush of wind as the ghostly clouds swirled around us.

And then we heard a man's voice shouting over the wind: "Cut! Print that one! Good scene, everyone!"

"Huh?" Penny and Marty asked, confused.

I lowered my hands slowly and opened my eyes. I let out my breath in a long whoosh. A man came striding up to us. He wore jeans and a gray sweatshirt under a brown leather jacket. He had a blue-and-

white Dodgers cap sideways on his head. A blond ponytail tumbled out from under it. He carried a clipboard in one hand. He had a silver whistle around his neck. He smiled at Marty and me and flashed us a thumbs-up.

"Hey, what's up, guys? I'm Russ Denver. Good job! You looked really scared." The guy said.

"Huh?" I cried, my mouth dropping open. "We were really scared!"

"I'm so glad to see a real live human!" Marty cried.

"This tour - it's totally messed up!" I shrieked.

"Could you perhaps help us find an exit?" Penny asked. But before the guy could say anything, I snapped.

"The creatures! They're alive! They tried to hurt us! They really did! It wasn't any fun! It wasn't like a ride!" The words spilled out of me in a rush.

"It was really gross! The werewolves snapped at us and chased us up a wall!" Marty exclaimed.

The two of us started talking at once, telling this guy Denver all of the frightening things that had happened to us on the tour. All the while, Penny waited to get a word in.

"Whoa! Whoa!" A smile crossed his handsome face. He raised his clipboard as if to shield himself from us. "It's all special effects, guys. Didn't they explain to you that we're making a movie here? That we were filming your reactions?"

"No one did, sir. Marty and Erin were brought here by Erin's father while I somehow appeared here and don't know where I am." Penny explained.

"Penny's right. No one explained that, Mr. Denver! My dad brought us here. He designed the studio tour. And he told us we were the first

to try it out. But he didn't tell us about any movie being filmed. I really think-" I angrily began.

I felt Marty's hand on my shoulder. I knew Marty was trying to calm me down. But I didn't want to be calmed down. I was really angry. Mr. Denver turned back to a group of crew members behind him in the street.

"Take thirty, guys. Let's break for dinner." Mr. Denver said. They moved away, talking among themselves. Mr. Denver turned back to us. "Your father should have explained to you -"

"It's okay. Really." Marty interrupted. "We just got a little scared. All of the creatures seemed so real. And we didn't see any other people anywhere. You're the first real person we've seen all afternoon."

"My dad must be really worried." I told the movie director. "He said he'd be waiting for us on the main platform. Can you tell us how to get there?"

"And my father is probably worried as well. Can you show me the exit so I can leave and call him?" Penny asked.

"No problem." Mr. Denver replied before motioning to another crew member. "HEY! VAKAMA! COME HERE!"

"Yes. What do you need?" Vakama asked, walking over to us.

"Can you take this lady outside so she can call her father? She doesn't know how she ended up here."

"Alright. Follow me, young lady."

"Alright." Penny said before turning to Marty and me. "Goodbye, Friend Erin and Friend Marty. It was nice meeting you."

"It was nice meeting you, Penny." I said.

"It was. And thanks for saving us." Marty added. Smiling, Penny followed Vakama out of the room.

"As for you two." Mr. Denver said, getting our attention. "See that big house there with the open door?"

Marty and I stared at the house across the street. A narrow path led up to the house. A pale yellow light shone inside the open front door.

"That's Shockro's House of Shocks." The director explained. "Go right in that door and straight through the house."

"But won't we get shocked in there?" Marty demanded. "In the movie, anyone who goes into Shockro's house gets jolted with twenty million volts of electricity!"

"That's just in the movie. The house is just a set. It's perfectly safe. Go through the house. Then, out the back, you will see the main building on the other side of the street. You can't miss it."

"Thank you!" Marty and I called out at once. Marty turned and started running full speed toward the house.

"I'm sorry for yelling before." I said, turning to Mr. Denver. "I was just so scared, and I thought-"

I gasped.

Mr. Denver had turned away. And I saw the long power cord - the power cord that was plugged into his back. He wasn't an actual human. He wasn't a movie director. He was some kind of robot. He was fake like all the others. He was lying to us.

Lying!

I turned and cupped my hands around my mouth. I started to run, frantically calling after Marty: "Don't go in there! Marty - stop! Don't

go in that house!"

Too late.

Marty was already running through the door.

Marty - wait! Stop!" I shouted as I ran. I had to stop him. The director was a fake. I knew he wasn't telling the truth. My bare feet pounded the hard pavement. I plunged up the path as Marty trotted into the doorway. "Marty - please! Stop!"

I flew to the doorway, reached out both hands, and made a wild dive to tackle him.

But I missed!

I skidded across the walk on my stomach. As soon as Marty entered the house, I saw the flash of white light. I heard a loud buzz. Then, the sharp crackle of electricity. The room exploded in a flash of lightning. So bright I had to shield my eyes. When I opened them, I saw Marty sprawled facedown on the floor.

"Nooooo!" I shouted.

Scrambling to my feet, I dove into the house. Would I get shocked, too? I didn't care. I had to get to Marty. I had to help him out of there.

"Marty! Marty!" I screamed his name again and again.

He didn't move.

"Marty - please!" I grabbed his shoulders and started to shake him. "Wake up, Marty! Snap out of it! Marty!"

He didn't open his eyes. I suddenly felt a chill. A dark shadow slid over me. And I realized I wasn't alone in the house. I spun around with a gasp. Was it Shockro? Some other scary creature? A tall figure leaned over me. I squinted into the darkness, struggling to see his face.

"Dad!" I cried as he came into focus. "Dad! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

"Erin, what are you doing here?" He asked in a low voice.

"It-it's Marty!" I stammered. "You've got to help him, Dad. He's been shocked, and he-he -"

Dad leaned closer. Behind his eyeglasses, his brown eyes were cold. His face set in a troubled frown.

"Do something, Dad!" I pleaded. "Marty is hurt. He isn't moving. He won't open his eyes. The studio tour was so awful, Dad! Something is wrong. Something is terribly wrong!"

He didn't reply. He leaned closer. And as his face came into the soft light, I saw that he wasn't my father!

"Who are you?" I shrieked. "You're not my dad! Why aren't you helping me? Why aren't you helping Marty? Do something-please! Where's my dad? Where is he? Who are you? Help me! Somebody? Help me AAAAAARRRRRRRRR. Help MRRRRRRRRRRR. Dad-MARRRRRRR-RRRRRRR. DRRRMMMMMMMMmmmmm."

Mr. Wright stood staring down at Erin and Marty. He shook his head unhappily. He shut his eyes and let out a long sigh. Jared Curtis, one of the studio engineers, came running into The House of Shocks.

"Mr. Wright, what happened to your two kid robots?" He demanded.

"Programming problems." Mr. Wright answered. He pointed to the Erin robot, frozen in place on her knees beside the Marty robot. "I had to shut the girl off. Her memory chip must be bad. The Erin robot was supposed to think of me as her father. But just now, she didn't recognize me."

"And what about the Marty robot?" Jared asked.

"It's totally down." Mr. Wright replied. "I think the electrical system shorted out."

"What a shame." Jared said, bending to roll the Marty robot over. He pulled up the T-shirt and fiddled with some dials on the back. Jared opened up a panel on Marty's back and squinted at the red and green wires. "Hey, Mr. Wright, it was a great idea to make robot kids to test the park. I think we can fix them."

"All the other creatures, monsters, and robots worked perfectly. Not a single bug. I should have known there was a problem yesterday." Mr. Wright said. "We were in my office. The Erin robot asked about her mother. I built her. She doesn't have a mother. Oh, well. No problem. We'll reprogram these two. Put in new chips. They'll be good as new in no time. Then we'll try them out once again on the Shocker Studio Tour before we open the park to real kids."

"But what about the other robot girl?" Jared asked.

"She was not part of this. I don't know where she came from. All I know is that she is of Atlas design. And that means doing anything to her is out of the question. So, I had Vakama escort her off the premises." Mr. Wright answered. "Anyway. I have to go now."

He took the Marty robot from Jared and slung it over his shoulder. Then he picked up the Erin robot. He tossed it over his other shoulder. Then, humming to himself, he carried them to the engineering building.

Real World

"And even though we were technically offline, our memory units recorded everything that happened." Marty said.

"But we didn't wake up until a month later. Mr. Wright saw that he still hadn't fully 'fixed' us and decided to look for other parts. And that was the last we ever heard of him." Erin continued.

"And everything else just went from there. But that is a story for another time."

"Yup."

"Wow." Everyone said.

"So, nearly everyone was a robot designed by Mr. Wright?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"Yup. I think, in total, there were about three hundred humans here. Now, only about twenty. But they came after the place was transformed." Marty answered.

"Is anyone who worked there still alive or around? If so, I would like to have a few words with them." Summer growled. Androids or not, she believed that no kid should have to go through all that.

"I think our creator might still be alive. And maybe one other. But the rest are gone, or we don't know where they are." Erin answered.

"Very well." Summer sighed before getting up. "Anyway. Thank you for sharing your story."

"You're welcome." Marty said. "But now that we finished, it's time to go."

"Yeah. It's late."

"Indeed. And even though there might not be school tomorrow, everyone still needs their sleep. And I do mean everyone." Summer said in a voice that every one too knew all too well. It was a tone that dared anyone to challenge her.

"Yup. Good night, everyone." Erin said. "It was nice seeing you, Jaune."

"Nice seeing you guys." Jaune said, smiling.

"Bye, everyone. Bye, friend, Jaune." Penny said, crushing Jaune in a tight hug.

"Bye, Penny." Jaune said, chuckling.

"Bye, Penny." Ruby said, smiling.

"Bye, Friend Ruby." Penny said, hugging Ruby before exiting the house, followed by Erin and Marty.

"Okay. Now that's out of the way. Let's all head to sleep." Summer said.

"Right. Let me show you to your rooms." Jaune said.

"Wait." Velvet said.

"Yes, Velv?" Jaune asked.

"What about the Ghost Dog?" Velvet asked, pointing to the sleeping ghost hound. And surprisingly, Zwei was sleeping on top of it.

"Wow. I honestly forgot it was there." Coco said.

"Yeah." Everyone else agreed.

"I think we can leave it there. I don't think it's going to cause any more harm to anyone now that it got its tooth back." Jaune said.

"Are you just saying that, or do you actually believe it?" Ren asked.

"Both. Besides, I doubt anyone wants to wake him up."

"True."

"Anyway. Let's head to sleep. And tomorrow, Summer can tell us her story."

"Yes. We can do so during breakfast. But after you all tell me about my daughters' adventures at Beacon." Summer said.

"MOM!" Yang and Ruby whined, causing everyone else to chuckle.

Notes:

I had hoped to get this chapter out earlier, but shit kept hitting the fan.

I looked through some early reviews and remembered how some people felt that Arc Town was not a great name for various reasons. And looking back at it, I concur. So, I'm changing it to Artakha, which translates to 'Great Refuge.' Guess what series that's from.

I am already working on the next chapter which will be Summer Rose and the Legend of the Lost Legend.

Chapter 12

Jaune Arc: Goosebumps Storyteller

Chapter 12: Legend of the Lost Legend

"Morning, everyone." Summer said as Team Rwby, Team Cfvy, and Team NPR entered the kitchen where Jaune and Summer were making everyone breakfast.

"Morning." Jaune said as they finished making fried corn tortillas topped with mildly spicy sauce, queso fresco cheese, and shredded meat with some avocado. While the recipe would have generally called for spicy hot sauce, Jaune chose a less spicy one since he knew some of his teammates and friends couldn't stand the heat of some hot sauces.

"Morning." Everyone else said, fighting through yawns. However, they all perked up once the delicious smell of breakfast entered their noses.

"How did everyone sleep?" Summer asked as everyone sat at the extended table. While the table that was usually in the kitchen could hold five people, there were two other tables downstairs that could be attached to it, bringing the total amount of people able to sit there to fifteen.

"Fine." Most of them answered.

"I slept great." Velvet answered, smiling.

"Of course, you did, Bun-Bun." Coco said, chuckling, as she went to the counter and started preparing coffee for everyone. Even though no one said anything, everyone knew why Velvet slept great, especially considering everyone saw Jaune and Velvet enter the same bedroom. Thankfully for Blake, who was the only other person

who had enhanced hearing, Velvet and Jaune only kissed a bit before falling asleep.

"Lucky." Ruby said, stretching. Typically, she fell asleep quickly but couldn't for some reason.

"Don't worry, Rubes. You'll get a good night's sleep soon. I just know it." Yang assured before gaining a devious smile that only an older sister could get. "But it will come sooner once you ask out that Penny girl."

"W-what!?" Ruby asked, shocked. "W-why would I a-ask Penny out?"

"You don't need to hide it, Ruby. And besides, we saw how you acted last night."

"I-I-I..."

"Maybe you can even get some snu-snu once everyone else goes to sleep." Yang said, causing the young reaper to blush fiercely and cover her head with her hood while everyone else chuckled.

"Yang. Stop teasing Ruby." Summer warned as she and Jaune placed everyone's food on the table.

"Alright." Yang said, chuckling.

"Yang." Summer warned as she and Jaune sat down.

"Alright, alright. I'll stop teasing my little sis about her obvious crush on Penny."

"Good." Summer sighed.

"Jaune?" Ruby asked.

"Yes?" Jaune asked.

"How did you manage to deal with seven sisters growing up? I can barely handle Yang and her teasing sometimes." Ruby asked, causing Yang to roll her eyes and gently punch her.

"Oh, it was not easy. There was a lot of teasing, arguing, fighting, pranks, and just embarrassing each other whenever we got the chance. But despite all that, we still loved each other and had each other's back." Jaune answered. "Just like you and Yang have each other's back."

"He's right, Rubes. I might tease you and will continue to tease you long after you and Penny get together." Yang said, wrapping her arm around the blushing reaper. "But I'll always be on your side."

"Thanks, Yang." Ruby said, smiling.

"I sure missed seeing my two daughters smiling and getting along. We have a lot to catch up on." Summer said, looking forward to spending time with her daughters and Taiyang if he was still alive. However, first things first. She needed to have a *LONG* talk with Ozpin for sending her on that adventure that separated her from her loving family. While she didn't have anything solid yet, Summer was sure that Ozpin knew of the dangers and sent her on it anyway. To her, it felt like he was hiding something.

"Yeah. We have so much to tell you." Ruby said.

"We've been on a ton of adventures." Yang added. "And even more since we got accepted into Beacon. Oh, and I bet Dad will be shocked to see you again."

"Oh, I'm so proud of you two. You two have to tell me everything." Summer said. "And it would be nice to see my husband again after so long."

"But on the subject of catching up with your daughters and telling everything." Coco interjected, causing the air to tense up. "What happened to you, Mrs. Rose?"

"Yes. What happened? We heard a while back how one member of the legendary Team STRQ simply vanished without a trace while on an assignment." Ren asked, causing Summer to sigh.

"A lot that's hard to believe." Summer answered. "But considering there was a Ghost Dog here and none of you seemed put off by its existence, I take it this is not the first time something strange or supernatural has happened."

"No." Everyone answered. However, little did anyone know that everyone had different reasons for their answers.

"The Ghost Dog was just a recent one that occurred yesterday." Yatsuhashi answered.

"But speaking of the Ghost Dog, where is it?" Blake asked.

"And where's Zwei?" Ruby added, looking around the kitchen and now seeing the furball.

"They are both in the back. Zwei went to do his business and get some fresh air. And for some reason, the Ghost Dog decided to join him." Jaune answered, silently wondering what would happen to the Ghost Dog after they left. Will it leave as well or follow them back to Beacon?

"Okay."

"But back to the question. Yes, this wasn't our first time seeing something strange. It is only our most recent set of events." Weiss said.

"When did these recent events start?" Summer asked, curious and slightly concerned.

"About a week or two ago, when Jaune started reading stories from his book. But at the time, we didn't know they were real." Nora answered.

"Yeah. We thought they were simply cheesy stories." Ruby added.

"However, that changed when Coco accidentally took a photo of Jaune with a cursed camera that sent him somewhere." Velvet added.

"And to our shock, Roman and Neo told us everything about how there were lots of strange things in this world, like monsters, werewolves, and vampires." Pyrrha said, sounding as if it were normal.

"Jaune. You have stories about all these strange events?" Summer asked.

"Yes. But not all of them. There's a lot we need to catch you up on. But to keep it simple, me, my family, and others have records of strange events or creatures. However, we only have records of events and creatures that we know of. But there could be thousands out there and thousands more happening as we speak." Jaune answered. "And that's just saying that we have records of them. But just because we know of them does not mean we know everything about it, just like what caused you to disappear."

"That's true. Even Mr. Clarke didn't know everything about that." Summer said.

"Didn't know everything about what?" Yang asked, curious.

"The Legend of the Lost Legend."

"What's that?" Coco asked, curious.

"No one really knows. And the tales surrounding it change each time someone else learns about it." Jaune answered.

"He's right. The most recent one was with Mr. Clarke, where it was a rare and valuable document. And I think before that, it was about a map that led to a massive pile of treasure that was owned by an

infamous pirate called Gol D. Roger. But there is something that is consistent with each story, and that the legend part is always something many would consider legendary." Summer said.

"Fox is asking if you know how old it is like you do with the cursed camera." Yatsuhashi said.

"No. We don't know exactly how old it is. We hardly know anything about it. But from what little we know, it has to be at least a thousand years old." Jaune answered. "There's even some speculation that it was already around when the Brothers created Remnant."

"Wow." Everyone else said, shocked.

"But how does this tie in with your disappearance, Mrs. Rose?" Blake asked.

"Everything, honestly. Ozpin assigned me to accompany Mr. Clarke and his children. At first, everything seemed like it would be an assignment. I thought the worst thing we would encounter was some wild animals in the forest. And maybe a Grimm or two, but that's about it." Summer answered.

"If it is alright with you, Mrs. Rose, may you tell us what happened?" Weiss asked.

"And would it be alright if I wrote it down so we have a record of it happening?" Jaune asked while taking out his book and a pen.

"It's fine. I'll tell the story, and you can write it down, Jaune. But on three conditions." Summer answered.

"What are they?" Coco asked, curious, as she handed everyone their coffee. But on Ren's behalf, she gave Nora one with no sugar.

"First, there's no need for formalities. So, please call me Summer. Besides, Mrs. Rose makes me feel old, even though I'm not that old."

"Alright, Summer." Everyone said.

"Second, after I finish telling the story, you all have to catch me up on everything that has happened. All the major events. I need to be up to date with everything that is happening. But that also includes all the strange things you and your family have recorded, Jaune. I have a feeling this is only the beginning."

"Alright." Jaune agreed. While there would be some things he would have to omit, Jaune felt like he could tell a lot to Summer about all the events he recorded. But he also agreed that it felt like this was only the beginning of something more.

"What's the third condition, Mom?" Ruby asked. However, she and Yang had to suppress a shiver when Summer smiled. And it was a smile that they knew all too well. Jaune even knew what it meant as he had seen it on his mother when she first met Terra.

"In addition to getting me up to speed, you all have to tell me all about the adventures my daughters had at Beacon. And the more embarrassing, the better." Summer answered, smirking.

"MOM!" Yang and Ruby whined.

"Deal." Everyone else said, with Blake and Weiss smirking as they would not pass up an opportunity to get some payback.

"And we got some juicy and really embarrassing ones to tell you." Blake said.

"I'm looking forward to it." Summer said. "Alright, then. My adventure with The Legend of the Lost Legend began roughly eleven years ago since Ruby was only three the last time I saw her. I was called by Ozpin to accompany Mr. Clarke and his children on an expedition to find the so-called Legend of the Lost Legend. And after an eight-hour trip, I arrived in the little town of Brovania in Mistral. After getting off the bullhead, I went to Mr. Clarke's residence, where he just finished telling his children a story."

Story

"I don't see Dad." Justin Clarke shouted, tugging his gloves under the sleeves of his heavy blue parka before shielding his eyes. He told his sister, Marissa. "Do you?"

"I can't see anything!" Marissa cried, shouting over the wind. "All I can see is ice!"

The sled dogs barked and shook themselves, eager to start moving again. Justin narrowed his eyes, squinting to the right, then the left. The ice stretched smooth and shiny, silvery under the bright sunlight. In the distance, it darkened to blue. It darkened and darkened until the blue ice appeared to melt into the sky. Justin couldn't see where the ice ended, and the sky began.

"It's cold." Marissa murmured as a sharp gust of wind blew the parka hood off her red hair. She instantly reached up with both gloved hands and pulled it back in place.

Justin rubbed his stub of a nose. He pressed his furry gloves against his frozen cheeks, trying to warm them. The dogs tugged. Justin grabbed the handle of the dogsled to keep it from sliding away.

"What do we do now?" Marissa asked. Justin could hear a slight tremble in her voice. He knew his sister was as frightened as he was.

"Keep going, I guess. Keep going until we find Dad." Justin answered as he stepped onto the sled.

"Maybe we should stay right here. If we stay here, it will be easier for Dad to find us." Marissa said, shaking her head as she held her hood in place with both hands. Justin stared at his sister and wondered why she looked so different. But then he realized that the cold had made her freckles disappear!

"It's too cold to stay in one place. It will be warmer if we keep moving."

He helped her onto the back of the sled. At twelve, he was only a year older than Marissa. But he was big and athletic, and she was tiny and skinny. The dogs grunted and impatiently pawed the silvery ice.

"I hate Antarctica!" Marissa shouted, grabbing the sled handle with both hands. "I hate everything about it. I can't even spell it!"

'Uh-oh. Here she goes again. Once Marissa started complaining, she never stopped.' Justin thought. "We'll be okay. As soon as we find Dad, everything will be okay. And we'll have some amazing adventures."

"I hate amazing adventures! Almost as much as I hate Antarctica! I can't believe he brought us to this awful place and then lost us!"

Justin gazed up at the sky. The sun had started to set. Wide streaks of golden light sparkled over the ice.

"We'll find Dad really soon. I know we will. Let's get going, okay? Before we freeze." Justin said as he lowered his hood. He snapped the line and, in a deep voice, called out to the six dogs. "Mush! Mush!"

The dogs lowered their heads and moved forward with a burst of speed. The sled jerked hard as it started to slide. Justin let out a startled shriek as he felt himself start to fall. His gloved hands flew off the sled handle. He frantically tried to grab it.

But he missed.

And he fell off the sled onto his back on the ice.

"Ooooof!" Justin felt the breath whoosh from his lungs. His arms and legs kicked the air like a bug on its back. He struggled to a sitting

position. The ice shimmered all around him. Shimmering so brightly, Justin could barely see the sled as it sped away.

"Justin! I can't stop it!" Marissa's shrill shriek sounded tiny against the steady rush of cold wind.

"Marissa!" Justin shouted.

"I can't stop it! Help me! Help!"

Marissa's cry was already so far away. Justin leaped to his feet and started to run after the sled. But he fell again, face first this time. For a moment, Justin pondered how he could run in snowshoes as it felt like he was wearing tennis rackets. Yet, Justin knew he had no choice. He jumped back up and started to run. He had to catch the sled. He couldn't let Marissa face the cold and the endless ice alone.

"I'm coming!" Justin shouted. "Marissa! I'm coming!"

Justin lowered his head against the onrushing wind. He dug the snowshoes into the snowy surface of the ice. One step. Then another. Then another. Running hard, Justin raised his head and squinted into the distance. The sled was a dark blur against the glowing ice. A tiny blur.

"Marissa!" Justin shouted. "Stop the sled! Pull the line! Pull it!"

But he knew she couldn't hear him. His heart thudded in his chest. Justin felt a sharp stab of pain in his side. His legs ached from lifting the heavy snowshoes. But he kept moving. He didn't slow down. When Justin gazed up again, the sled appeared larger. Closer.

"Huh?" Justin asked, confused, as a puff of smoke flew over his head.

He wondered if he was catching up to the sled. And after a moment, Justin realized that was the case. He was somehow closing the distance. The sled appeared clearer now. Closer. Justin could see

Marissa holding on with one hand and waving frantically to him with the other.

"How-how did you stop the sled?" Justin huffed as he staggered up to her. Marissa's blue eyes were wide with fear as she trembled.

"I didn't stop it." Marissa answered.

"But-"

"It stopped itself. The dogs. They all stopped. I'm frightened, Justin. They stopped all by themselves." Marissa said as she pointed to the dogs. "Look at them."

Justin turned to the dogs at the front of the sled. All six of them had their heads lowered, their backs arched. They all whimpered and shook, huddled together.

"Something is frightening them," Justin murmured, feeling a sudden chill of fear.

"They won't move." Marissa said. "They just hunch together, whimpering. What are we going to do?"

Justin didn't reply. He stared past the sled, past the frightened dogs. He stared at an amazing sight. A blue lake. Almost perfectly round, as if someone had carved it out of the ice. A pool of water reflecting the clear blue of the sky.

"Oh, wow!" Marissa gasped.

In the center of the small lake, they both saw a creature sitting on a large chunk of ice. It had its head lowered, staring back at them.

A sea lion.

A blue sea lion!

"It's the one Dad is looking for!" Justin cried. He stepped up beside his sister as they both stared in amazement at the magical creature.

"The only blue sea lion in the world." Marissa murmured. "A creature from a myth. No one even believes it is real."

'Where is Dad?' Justin wondered, not taking his eyes off the enormous blue animal.

How can Dad be missing this? He brought us all the way to Antarctica to search for this creature. And now he's lost! And Marissa and I are the only ones to see it.

"Do you think we can get closer to it?" Marissa asked. "Can we walk up to the edge of the water and see it better?"

"Dad said it has strange powers." Justin nervously answered. "Maybe we should stay back here."

"But I want to see it better." Marissa protested. She started to step off the sled before stopping a second later.

They both heard the rumbling sound at the same time. A deep rumble, low at first and then louder.

"Where is it coming from?" Marissa whispered, her eyes suddenly wide with fear.

"The sea lion?" Justin guessed. "Did it roar?"

No.

They heard it again. Louder this time. It sounded like thunder.

Thunder. . . that was beneath them!

And this time, the ground shook.

"Ohh!" A frightened cry escaped Justin's throat as he looked down and saw the ice begin to break. He grabbed the back of the sled and pulled himself onto it.

"What is happening?" Marissa cried as she grasped the sled handle with both hands.

Another rumble of thunder occurred beneath them.

The sled tilted and started to rock. The sound of cracking ice drowned out the low rumble. Ice cracked all around. The ground appeared to split open. The blue sea lion, perched in the center of the small, round lake, stared back calmly at them.

A loud crack made the dogs howl. The sled bobbed and tilted. Justin grasped the handle as tightly as he could. He peered down and saw that the ground holding them had broken away, broken free. As the ice cracked, the lake opened up, and water rushed all around.

"It's not a lake." Justin realized. "It's a hidden ocean - under the ice!

"We-we're floating away!" Marissa shrieked.

The dogs howled, drowning out the sound of the cracking ice. Water rushed up over the sides of the sled. A strong current carried the sled away. Justin and Marissa held on tightly, struggling to stay on the rocking, tilting sled. The blue sea lion faded into the distance. And they floated away, bobbing and swaying.

Floating out to sea.

"What happens next, Dad?" I asked.

"Yeah. Don't stop there." Marissa begged. "You can't leave Justin and me on a chunk of ice floating out into the ocean. Go on with the story."

I pulled the top of the sleeping bag up to his chin. Outside their tent, the fire flickered low. I could hear the chittering of insects all around

us in the forest. I peered out through the open tent flap. It was almost too dark to see anything. But I could make out Mrs. Rose's tent just beyond the campfire and some of the nearby trees. I could also see a narrow patch of purple sky. But it was empty. There was no moon or stars at all.

'Is anything darker than a forest?' I wondered.

We had a kerosene lantern inside the tent. It sent warm yellow light around us. But there was no heat. Dad buttoned the top button of his sweater. It had been hot in the tent when we came in after we had the dinner that Mrs. Rose had made us. But now, a damp chill had fallen over us.

"That's all for tonight." Dad said, scratching his brown beard.

"But what happens next?" Marissa demanded. "Go on with the story, Dad. Please!"

"Yeah." I agreed. "Do we float out to sea? How do we get back? Do you show up and rescue Marissa and me?"

"I don't know. I don't know what happens next." Dad answered, shrugging his big shoulders. Under the woolly sweater, he looked like a big, brown bear. He sighed and bent over his sleeping bag. Dad has a big stomach, and it's hard for him to bend over. He started to unfold the sleeping bag. "I haven't thought of an ending to the story yet. Maybe I'll dream a good ending tonight."

Marissa and I both groaned. We hate it when Dad stops a story in the middle. He always leaves us in terrible danger. And sometimes we have to wait for days to find out if we survive. Dad sat down on the tent floor. He groaned as he pulled off his boots. Then he struggled to squeeze into the sleeping bag.

"Good night." Marissa said, yawning. "I'm so tired."

I felt tired, too. We'd trudged through the forest since early morning, cutting our own path through the trees, rocks, and tangled weeds. And even with Mrs. Roses's help, it was still a lot.

"Justin, do me a favor," Dad said. He pointed to the kerosene lantern. "Turn that off, okay?"

"No problem." I said.

I leaned forward and reached for the lantern. My hand bumped it and knocked it on its side. And in seconds, the tent was ablaze with orange and yellow flames. I let out a sick cry and struggled to pull myself out of the sleeping bag. Dad climbed to his feet first. I never saw him move so fast. He picked up a section of the canvas tent floor and smothered the flames on the tent wall.

"Dad! Sorry!" I choked out as I finally struggled out of the sleeping bag.

Luckily, the flames had only caught on one wall. I have too good an imagination. I instantly pictured us surrounded by fire. I guess I get my imagination from Dad. Sometimes it comes in handy. Sometimes it doesn't. Now I was breathing hard, my whole body trembling.

"Sorry." I repeated.

"That was close!" Marissa cried, shivering.

"Is everything alright here? I heard some screaming?" Mrs. Rose asked as she opened the tent.

"Justin is such a klutz!" Marissa shouted, shivering.

"Everything is alright, Mrs. Rose. We just had a little accident with the lamp." Dad said.

"It doesn't seem like that." Mrs. Rose said, eyeing the hold in the tent.

"Don't worry about that. It's a small hole. And I brought some supplies to patch it up good as new."

"Okay. But be careful. Kerosene lamps aren't that safe."

"We will."

"Good night then." Mrs. Rose said before leaving with Marissa closing the tent flap. Dad shook his head as he spread a section of the canvas floor on the hole.

"This thing burns pretty fast." I murmured. Dad grunted but didn't reply.

"I'd hate to be in the middle of the forest without a tent." Marissa said. "Especially in this weird country."

"Everything is fine." Dad said softly, still fiddling with the tent wall before sourly adding. "But no thanks to either of you."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked, straightening the leg of my pajama pants.

"You two haven't been much help."

"What did I do?" Marissa asked shrilly. "I didn't try to burn the tent down."

"You wandered off and got lost this morning. Mrs. Rose had to stop her call with her family to go find you." Dad reminded her.

"I thought I saw a weird animal." Marissa said.

"And you went after it despite Mrs. Rose explicitly saying several times not to wander off since Grimm have been spotted in this forest before."

"It was probably a squirrel." I chimed in. "Or her shadow."

"Give me a break, Justin." Marissa muttered.

"Then tonight, you both refused to get firewood." Dad said.

"We were tired." I explained.

"And we didn't know where to look." Marissa added.

"In a forest? You don't know where to look for firewood in a forest? How about on the ground? Plus, how can you two be tired? Neither of you did anything aside from sometimes carrying some of the supplies." Dad was getting steamed.

'Maybe he's right.' I thought.

Maybe Marissa and I should try to be a little more helpful. After all, this was a very important trip for Dad. He was even allowed to bring a huntress to help us deal with threats such as the Grimm and whatever else we might encounter. And it wasn't just any huntress. It was Summer Rose, who was appointed by Ozpin of Beacon Academy himself to accompany us. Yet, despite the dangers, Dad still brought us along.

Our dad is Richard Clarke. He's a very famous writer, storyteller, and story collector. Dad travels all over the world, searching for stories. All kinds of stories. Then he puts them in books. He has published ten books of stories. And he goes all over the world, telling some of the stories he has hunted down.

He has been on a lot of exciting trips. But this one was special. He brought Marissa and me to Mistral - to this forest in the tiny country of Brovania - because of a very special search. Dad had kept the whole thing as a surprise. But he told us about it as we made our way through the forest that morning.

Flashback

"We've come to Brovania to search for the Lost Legend." Dad explained as he pulled a large black beetle from his beard and tossed it away. "The Lost Legend is a very old manuscript. It is said to be hidden away in a silver chest. It hasn't been seen for five hundred years."

"Wow." Marissa murmured from far behind us. She kept stopping to look at bugs and wildflowers. Dad, Mrs. Rose, and I had to keep waiting for her to catch up.

"What is the legend about?" I asked.

"No one knows what the legend is about. Because it has been lost for so long." Dad answered as he shifted the heavy equipment on his back.

"Not to mention, from what I have heard, whatever the 'legend' part of the manuscript changes all the time." Mrs. Rose added.

"She's correct. It changes almost all the time. That's why it's so hard to find anything concrete about it." Dad said as he used his machete to hack away a tall clump of weeds.

Then, we followed Dad and Mrs. Rose through a narrow opening in the trees. The trees were so thick and leafy overhead little sunlight could get through. Even though it was still morning, the forest stretched as dark as night. Luckily, Mrs. Rose's scythe made short work of anything in our way.

"If we find the Lost Legend, we'll be very lucky." Dad said. "It will change everyone's lives."

"What do you mean?" I asked, curious. But I became confused when Dad's expression turned solemn.

"The ancient manuscript of the Lost Legend is worth a fortune. The whole world is curious about it. The whole world wants to read it. Because no one knows who wrote it - or what it's about."

"Which makes it so much more valuable. Imagine all the secrets it can unveil." Mrs. Rose added.

I thought about it all day as we twisted our way through the forest. What if I'm the one to find it? What if I look down and see the silver chest? Hidden between two rocks, maybe. Or half-buried in the dirt with only part of its silver lid poking up. Wouldn't that be cool? Wouldn't that be awesome? I pictured how happy Dad would be. And I thought about how rich and famous I would be too. I'd be a hero. A real hero, although maybe not in the same sense as Mrs. Rose.

End Flashback

That's what I thought about all day.

But I knew I hadn't been much of a hero so far. In fact, I nearly burned down the tent. And Dad was already grumbling that Marissa and I hadn't been much help. I'll be more helpful; I promised silently that night. I snuggled lower into the sleeping bag, trying to get warm.

I could hear Dad snoring lightly on the other side of the tent. Dad can fall asleep in seconds. And he's such a sound sleeper that you practically have to hit him in the head to wake him up! Marissa and I are not like Dad. It takes us hours to fall asleep. And the tiniest, tiniest sound wakes us up instantly.

'I wonder if Mrs. Rose is also a sound sleeper or is like us, and it takes a while for her to fall asleep.' I wondered.

So now I lay on my back in the sleeping bag, staring up at the dark ceiling of the tent. Trying to clear my mind. Trying not to think about anything. Trying to fall asleep... asleep... asleep.

I had almost drifted off when an animal howl cut through the silence. An angry howl. A menacing howl.

So close!

It sounded like it was right outside the tent. I jerked straight up, wide awake and breathing hard. I knew this wasn't a storybook creature. This creature was real. The air in the tent felt cold against my hot skin. I realized that I was sweating. I listened hard and heard a shuffling sound. A low growl. The crackle of heavy paws over the leafy forest ground. For a moment, I thought that it was Mrs. Rose. But then I remembered how stealthy she could be and realized it couldn't have been her. My heart pounding, I slid the sleeping bag down and started to crawl out of it.

"Oh!" I nearly shrieked when someone pushed past me. "Dad?"

No. I could still hear Dad's steady snores from across the tent. I knew it would take more than a terrifying animal howl to wake Dad up! He was that much of a heavy sleeper.

"Marissa." I whispered.

"Sssshh. I heard it, too." Marissa held a finger up to her mouth as she crawled toward the tent flap. I moved quickly beside her. We stopped in front of the closed flap. "It's some kind of animal."

"Maybe it's a werewolf!"

There goes my wild imagination again. But aren't werewolves supposed to live deep in the forests of Europe? I think that's where all the old werewolf movies took place. In a forest just like this one. I heard another low growl. I grabbed the tent flap and pulled it up. Cold air rushed in. A gust of wind ruffled my pajama shirt. I peered out into the night. A mist had fallen over the small clearing where we had set up the tents. Pale moonlight shining through the mist turned everything a shade of blue. Thankfully, it didn't entirely obscure anything.

"What is it? Do you see it?" Marissa whispered from behind me. I couldn't see any animal. I only saw swirls of blue mist. "Get back inside."

I heard more shuffling sounds followed by a loud sniff.

"Hurry. Get back in." Marissa urged.

"Just wait," I whispered.

I had to see what was out there. I had to see what was making those noises. I know it would have been better to alert Mrs. Rose. But something was making me want to exit the tent alone. I shivered. The air felt heavy and damp. Wisps of the blue fog seemed to cling to me. I took a step out of the tent. The ground sent a shock of cold up from my bare feet. I held my breath, took another step, and saw the creature.

A dog. A big dog, tall. It looked like a shepherd, only with long, white fur. The white fur shimmered like silver under the misty moonlight. The dog had his head lowered as he sniffed the ground. As I stared at the animal, he raised his head, turned to me, and started to wag his tail.

I love dogs. I've always loved dogs. Without thinking, I reached out my arms. And I ran to pet him.

"No! Don't!" Marissa screamed.

Real World

"How old were the kids again?" Jaune asked, writing everything down.

"I believe Justin was twelve while Marissa was eleven. And their father was somewhere in his late thirties." Summer answered.

"That explains a lot." Coco said, with Summer shrugging. While she knew the kids, specifically Marissa, didn't always listen or pay attention, she didn't blame them. They were kids, after all. They were kids that weren't training to become future huntsmen.

"But speaking of ages." Blake began. "This happened roughly eleven years ago, right?"

"Yes. Well, more or less."

"Did you or the others age while you were there?"

"No, surprisingly. Well, at least physically. We did mentally age, but that was from experience."

"What about the others? Do you know what happened to them before the Ghost Dog's wish brought you here?" Ren asked.

"Well, they were fine right before the wish brought me here. Marissa and Justin had just returned from fishing, and Mr. Clarke was inside one of the houses we built, studying his notes."

"I wonder if there is any way to free them." Yatsuhashi said.

"No. Unfortunately, not." Summer answered with a sigh.

"Someone must always be with the Legend of the Lost Legend. You might be able to free Mr. Clarke and his family, but they will be replaced shortly after." Jaune added.

"Is it possible to move the scroll to somewhere that's more easily accessible?" Weiss asked.

"No. That won't work." Summer answered.

"Why not?" Velvet asked.

"It's a lost legend. It has to be lost. And if you bring it to someplace that's familiar, and everyone knows, then it would defeat the whole 'lost' part of it. Besides, you have to be lost to find a place that can't be found, elseways everyone would know where it was." Pyrrha answered.

"Is that true?" Yang asked.

"Unfortunately, Ms. Nikos is right. While we don't know everything about it, we do know that whoever or whatever has it will be lost." Summer answered.

"Fox is asking if there is any way to prevent it?" Yatsuhashi said.

"Your guess is as good as ours. Remember, we don't know a lot about it." Jaune said.

"The best we can hope for is to find a way to try and dissuade more people from going after it." Summer said.

"But what if we trick some... criminals into going after it?" Ruby asked.

"It's a long shot, but that could work." Jaune said. "The thing is, we need to find a way to trick them into going after it without them thinking something is wrong. And that's easier said than done."

"Jaune's right. Almost everything is easier said than done. Plus, we still would need to stop others from going after it and potentially freeing the criminals if that worked." Summer said before taking a sip of her coffee and relishing in the warm, familiar taste. It had been so long since she had anything that wasn't scavenged from a forest that she forgot how it felt to have a meal like this. Summer was even tempted to bake some cookies. But then she remembered how often Taiyang would insist that cookies should never be part of breakfast. However, she could still make them later and again once they were home again. "Anyway. Let's continue with the story. Before Justin could pet the dog, I grabbed his arm. He was surprised that he didn't hear me coming and asked me how I did that. But I ignored him and asked if he and Marissa found it strange that a seemingly normal dog appeared this deep in the forest."

Story

"Kind of." I answered before turning to the dog and realizing it had one brown eye while the other was blue. "Hey! It has two different

eye colours."

"He might be a wolf!" Marissa called. We turned to see that she had taken only one step from the tent. She clung to the flap, ready to duck inside at any instant.

"He's not a wolf. He's a dog." I said as Mrs. Rose and I looked at the dog. "At least, I think he's not a wolf. I mean, he's too friendly to be a wolf."

"But we should still remain on guard. It could be a trap as this seems too suspicious." Mrs. Rose said. And even though I couldn't see her face, I knew she was not happy that I was petting the dog. But it would be worth whatever lecture I might get as I love dogs. Moving forward, I reached down and scratched the thick, white fur on the dog's chest while pulling blades of dried grass and weeds from his fur. The dog wagged his tail happily at the treatment I was giving him.

"What is he doing out here?" Marissa demanded in a loud whisper. "Is he a wild dog? Justin. He might be dangerous."

"I don't think he is dangerous. But he could be a diversion." Mrs. Rose said as she scanned the trees for any kind of movement while the dog licked my hand.

"But maybe he's part of a pack." Marissa warned. She let go of the tent flap and took another step across the ground toward me. "Maybe the other wild dogs sent him out as a scout. Maybe there are a hundred of them!"

"Possibly. But I doubt hundreds." Mrs. Rose said, still looking around.

I climbed to my feet and glanced around. Squinting through the blue mist, I could see the tall, dark trees that circled the clearing. A half-moon floated low over the trees, shimmering through the fog. We listened hard, but all we got was silence.

"I think this guy is alone." I said.

"Remember that story Dad used to tell about the ghost dog?" Marissa asked, gazing down at the dog. "Remember? The dog used to appear outside someone's house. It was such a cute little dog. Very sweet and cuddly. It would tilt its head up toward the moon and let out an 'eeeh eeeh' sound as if it were laughing."

"Ghost Dog story?" Mrs. Rose asked. "What was it about?"

"It was about this cute dog. It was so cute people had to come out and pet it. And when they did, the dog would start to bark to call its ghost dog friends. And the friends were mean and ugly. They would circle the person before gobbling them up. And the last thing the victim would see was the cute, cuddly dog tilting back its head, laughing 'eeeh eeeh,' laughing at the moon." Marissa explained.

"I doubt this dog is the same one as in the story."

"Yeah. I don't think that's one of Dad's stories. It isn't good enough. I think it's one of yours." I added.

Marissa thinks she's a great storyteller, like Dad. But her stories are pretty dumb. Whoever heard of a laughing dog? Marissa took another step toward the dog and me. I shivered. The forest air was too cold and damp to be out in pajamas and bare feet.

"If he's a wild dog, he could be dangerous." Marissa repeated.

"He seems gentle enough." I said, petting his head again.

"Maybe. But if trained, dogs can be trained to be gentle one moment and vicious the next. Plus, even if he is genuinely gentle, he could still be carrying lots of diseases. And we don't have any antibiotics to fight the infection if we get one." Mrs. Rose said as my hand slid down the dog's fur. I was about to remove my hand as she did have a point. But I stopped when I felt something hard. I thought it was another dead leaf matted in his thick, white fur. I wrapped my hand

around it. Yet, to my surprise, it wasn't a leaf or stick. It was something else.

"It's not a wild dog." I said. "He has a collar. He must belong to someone."

"Maybe he ran away and got lost." Marissa said, kneeling beside the dog. "Maybe his owner is searching the forest for him."

"Possibly." Mrs. Rose agreed as I tugged the collar up over the thick fur. The dog turned his head and licked my hand.

"Does it have an ID tag or a license?" Marissa asked.

"That's what I'm looking for." I said. "Whoa. Hold on. There is something tucked under the collar."

"What is it?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"It's a note." I said as I unfolded the piece of paper.

"What does it say?"

"Maybe it has the owner's address or a phone number on it." Marissa said. I finished unfolding it and held the sheet of paper up close to my face to read it. "Well? What does it say?"

"Does it have the address of his owner or something else like a threat?" Mrs. Rose asked. But she pulled out her weapon when I gasped.

"Justin - what does it say?" Marissa asked. She tried to grab the note from my hand. But I swung it away from her.

"It's a very short note." I answered. "It reads: **'I KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE. FOLLOW SILVERDOG.'** "

"Silverdog?" Marissa lowered her gaze to the dog as his ears perked up. "Silverdog?"

"He knows his name." I said. I ran my eyes over the paper, trying to see if I had missed anything. But that's all there was. No name at the bottom. There was nothing else.

"I KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE!" Marrisa said, reading the note after she swiped it from me. The blue fog suddenly lowered around us, causing me to shiver.

"Twelve hours of traveling and not seeing anyone. Then, a random dog with a note arrives. And on the note, it says to follow him as whoever wrote it claims to know why we are here despite us not telling anyone else. This is definitely a trap." Mrs. Rose said.

"We'd better show this to Dad." I said.

"And I better grab the rest of my stuff from my tent."

Nodding, Marissa and I hurried to our tent while Mrs. Rose went to hers. I glanced back to make sure the dog wasn't leaving. Instead, Silverdog had walked over to a clump of tall weeds and was sniffing around them.

"Hurry." I whispered to Marissa.

We both made our way to Dad's sleeping bag. He was sound asleep on his back, making soft, blowing sounds through his lips. I dropped to my knees and leaned over him.

"Dad? Dad?" I asked.

He didn't stir.

"Dad? Wake up! It's important! Dad?" Marissa and I shouted at him. But he's such a sound sleeper, he didn't hear us.

"Tickle his beard. Sometimes that works." Marissa suggested. Shrugging, I tickled his beard.

Nothing. He snored away.

"Dad? Dad?" I asked, bringing my face down to his ear. I tried shaking him by the shoulders. But it was hard to get a good grip on the sleeping bag.

"Dad? Please! Wake up!" Marissa pleaded.

He let out a groan.

"Yes! DAD?" I cried, thinking he was going to wake up. But I groaned when Dad rolled onto his side, still sound asleep. I turned and saw that Marissa had crawled back to the tent opening.

"The dog is heading toward the trees. What should we do?" Marissa asked.

"Get dressed." I urged. "Hurry."

We both pulled on the jeans and sweatshirts we'd been wearing. I got one hiking boot on, then discovered I had a knot in the other shoelace. By the time I pulled the second boot on, Marissa was already back outside.

"Where is Silverdog?" I asked, hurrying up beside her. Marissa pointed through the thickening fog. Clouds had rolled over the moon. The heavy darkness made it almost impossible to see. But I spotted the big dog loping slowly toward the trees. "He's leaving! We have to follow him."

"Not without Dad." Marissa said, not moving. "We can't."

"But someone is trying to help us!" I cried.

"Someone knows where the Lost Legend is. They sent the dog to bring us."

"It may be a trap." Marissa insisted. "Some kind of evil trick."

"But, Marissa." I began, searching through the fog. Where was the dog? I could barely see him. He had reached the trees on the far

side of the clearing.

"Remember the story Dad tells about the forest imp?" Marissa asked. "The imp puts out a trail of flowers and candy in the forest. And when children follow the trail, it leads them into The Pit With No Bottom. And the kids fall and fall for the rest of their lives. Remember?"

"Marissa! Please!" I begged. "No more stories. Silverdog is getting away."

"But- but-" Marissa stammered. "Dad wouldn't want us to go wandering off on our own in the forest. You know he wouldn't. We'll be in real trouble. Plus, we should at least wait for Mrs. Rose. After all, she is the only one here with combat experience."

"What if we found the Lost Legend?" I said. "Then what? Then we wouldn't be in trouble, would we!"

"No! No way!" Marissa protested, folding her arms over her chest. "We can't go. No way, Justin."

"I guess you're right. Let the dog go on its way. Let's get some sleep." I said, shaking my head. I put my hand on her shoulder and led her back to the tent.

"Are you crazy?" Marissa cried as she spun away from me. "We can't let the dog get away! It may lead us right to the Lost Legend!"

She grabbed my hand, gave me a hard tug, and started to run, pulling me across the clearing. As I ran after her, I tried hard not to let her see the big smile on my face. I knew my little trick would work with Marissa. It always does. If I ever really want to do something, all I have to say is: "Let's not do it." Marissa always disagrees with me. Always. That makes it very easy to get her to do what I want.

"Dad said we weren't being helpful." Marissa murmured. "He was giving us a hard time because we wouldn't find firewood. What if we

find the Lost Legend? Then we'll be helping him big time!"

"Big time." I said.

I pictured Marissa and me handing Dad the silver chest containing the Lost Legend. I pictured the shock on Dad's face and the smile he would have. Then, I imagined the three of us on the TV news shows, telling everyone how Marissa and I found the valuable old manuscript without any help from Dad or Mrs. Rose.

"Should we at least tell Mrs. Rose this?" Marissa asked. However, I didn't answer as I realized something.

"Where's the dog?" I asked.

"Huh?" Marissa asked, turning back to the trees.

We both searched the darkness. The dog had disappeared. The fog clung to the dark trees. Clouds still covered the moon. Marissa and I peered into the darkness, listening hard. I sighed. I felt so disappointed.

"I think our adventure is over before it even started." I murmured. But I wasn't sure if I should have been glad that I was wrong when a loud bark made us both jump. "Hey!"

Silverdog barked again. He was calling us! We stepped between the trees, following the sound. My boots sank into the soft dirt. Under the tall trees, the sky grew even darker.

"Stick close together," Marissa pleaded. "It's so hard to see."

"We should have brought a flashlight." I replied. "We left in such a hurry, I didn't think-"

A loud crackling sound made me stop. The crisp thud of paws over dead leaves.

"This way," I urged Marissa. I turned toward the sound. "Silverdog is right up ahead."

I still couldn't see the dog. But I could hear his footsteps over the dry twigs and leaves of the forest floor. The dog had turned to the left, following a narrow path through the trees. The ground beneath my boots became hard. We both raised our arms in front of our faces as we stepped through a thicket of brambles.

"Ouch!" I cried out as prickly thorns pierced through the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

"Where is that dog taking us?" Marissa asked. I knew she was trying to sound calm. But I could hear the fear creep into her voice.

"He's taking us to someone who wants to help us. He's taking us to someone who is going to make us rich and famous." I answered before pulling a burr from my wrist. "Ow!"

I hoped I was right. I hoped that the note didn't lie. I hoped that the dog was taking us someplace nice. The footsteps turned sharply up ahead. I couldn't see a path now. Actually, I couldn't see three feet in front of me! We kept our arms in front of us, using them as shields. And we pushed our way through a thicket of tall weeds.

"He's speeding up." Marissa whispered.

She was right. I could hear the dog's footsteps moving more rapidly over the ground. Marissa and I began jogging, eager to keep up. Over our own crunching footsteps, I could hear the dog breathing hard. The flutter of wings - many wings, low over-head - made me duck.

"Were those birds? Or bats?" Marissa cried. I could still hear the fluttering in the distance now. The sound sent a chill down my back. So many flapping wings!

"They were birds." I said. "They had to be birds."

"Since when do birds fly like that at night?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I listened for the dog's footsteps up ahead. They seemed to be slowing down. We followed the sound through an opening between tall bushes and stepped into a broad, grassy clearing. As we made our way into the grass, the clouds floated away from the moon. Under the moonlight, dew-covered grass shimmered like diamonds. I gazed up from the grass and gasped in horror. Marissa grabbed my arm. Her mouth dropped open in shock.

"I don't believe it!" I cried. I stared at the creature standing a few yards up ahead of us.

Not the dog.

Not Silverdog.

A brown-and-black-spotted deer. A stag with antlers that curled up from his head and gleamed in the moonlight. We had followed the wrong animal. And now we were hopelessly lost. The big deer stared at us. Then he turned and trotted across the grass into the trees on the other side. Frozen in shock, we watched him disappear.

"We-we made a bad mistake." I managed to choke out. "I thought it was the dog. I really did."

"Let's not panic." Marissa said as she huddled close to me. A gust of wind made the tall grass whisper and bend. I heard a low moaning sound from the trees behind us. I tried to ignore it.

"You're right. We won't panic." I agreed. But my legs were shaking, and my mouth suddenly felt as dry as cotton.

"We'll go back the way we came. We didn't walk that far. It shouldn't be too hard to retrace our steps." Marissa said as she glanced around. "Which way did we come?"

"That way? No. That way? No..." I pointed. I wasn't sure. "Maybe we should panic."

"Why did we do this? Why were we so stupid?"

"We thought we were helping Dad."

"Now, we may never see him again!" Marissa shouted, on the verge of tears. I wanted to say something to calm her down. But the words caught in my throat. "This forest goes on for miles and miles! The whole country is probably forest. We'll never find anyone who can help us. We-we'll probably be eaten by bears or something before we ever get out."

"Don't say bears. There aren't any bears in this forest - are there?"

I shuddered. Dad had told us too many stories that ended with children being eaten by bears. That seemed to be one of Dad's favorite endings. It was never one of mine. The wind bent the grass back the other way. In the far distance, I heard the flutter of wings once again. And over the whisper of the wings, I heard another sound.

A dog bark?

Was I imagining it?

I listened hard and heard it again.

Yes!

"It's Silverdog!" Marissa cried. "He's calling us!"

"Let's go!" I exclaimed.

I heard another long series of barks. The dog was definitely calling us. We spun around and ran toward the sound. We ran back into the trees. We ran through the tall bushes and leaped over fallen logs. We ran toward the barking.

We ran, ran full speed.

Until the ground suddenly gave way.

A hole opened up beneath us.

And we started to fall.

"Noooooooo!" I screamed. "It's The Pit With No Bottom!"

Real World

"Wow." Everyone said.

"Talk about your actions coming back to bite you in the ass." Yang said.

"Language, Yang." Summer warned. "But yes. Those two were not the sharpest tools in the shed. But at least they had good intentions when they did it, which was helping their father. Granted, I was not too thrilled when I learned about Justin tricking his sister to chase after the dog with him."

"Did you sisters ever try to trick you, Jaune?" Velvet asked.

"Oh, yes. Plenty of times. But they were never dangerous. Oftentimes, it was just so that I could be their guinea pig for dress-up or testing new makeup." Jaune answered.

"Did they ever stop?" Ren asked, now realizing why Jaune didn't seem bothered by having to wear those dresses at Beacon. Or how he seemed to be an expert when it came to makeup when he helped Pyrrha or Nora with theirs.

"Tricking me, yes. But that's just because they became more direct."

"What did they do if you said no?" Coco asked.

"It would depend on who I said no to. But most of the time, they would either become more relentless in their teasing or take some of my allowance while I wasn't looking."

"That must have sucked." Blake said, silently glad she was a single child.

"Eh. Yeah. But it wasn't as bad as you might think. Plus, it was one way we spent time together." Jaune shrugged.

"Anyway. What were you doing while Justin and Marissa chased after the dog, Summer?" Weiss asked.

"I was grabbing my gear and double-checking to ensure whoever had sent the dog didn't leave anything else in the camp. But before I could return to Justin and Marissa, I heard what sounded like a few people talking nearby. But when I went to investigate, there was no one there. For a moment, I thought they were hiding, but after ten minutes of searching, I found nothing. All I heard was the fluttering of bat wings. Thinking I was just on edge, I returned to the camp, where I saw that the kids had already chased after the dog instead of waiting for me. So, I went looking for them." Summer answered.

"Yeah. It must have been some bats that you heard." Pyrrha said, wondering if she knew them.

"Most likely. Anyway. Back to the story. From what Marissa and Justin told me, they landed hard in the pit, thinking it was the same one from the stories their father told them. But as it turned out, it was just a hill." Summer said, chuckling as she recalled how embarrassed those two were.

Story

"What did you yell?" Marissa asked as she brushed the dirt off her jeans.

"Uh... nothing." I mumbled. "Just yelled."

When we climbed back to the top, Silverdog was waiting for us. The dog raised his head and stared at us with his brown and blue eyes – as if to say: "What is your problem? Why can't you two jerks keep up with me?"

As soon as we joined Silverdog at the top of the hill, he turned and loped off, wagging his furry white tail. Every few steps, he glanced back to make sure we were following. I still felt kind of shaky from the fall. Even though it was such a short drop, I had banged my knees pretty hard. They still ached. My heart still raced.

'Dad and his crazy stories.' I thought, shaking my head. *'The Pit With No Bottom . . . why would I even think such a crazy thought?'*

Well... what could be crazier than following a big white dog through a Brovanian forest in the middle of the night? Maybe Marissa and I will have a legend to tell our friends when we're finished. It could even go like this: **"The Legend of the Two Incredibly Stupid Kids."** Or, maybe we'll find the silver chest containing the Lost Legend - and be rich and famous and make Dad proud. These were my thoughts as my sister and I followed Silverdog along a curving path through the forest. The dog loped easily between the trees and weeds. And we trotted behind him, eager not to lose him again. After a few minutes, we stepped into a large patch of tall grass. Marissa and I stopped and watched Silverdog run across the grass, prancing, raising his legs high. Silverdog turned to the cabin and was about to run to it but stopped when he heard something. His ears perked up and turned to where it came from. However, before we could try to figure out what it was, Marissa and I tensed up when we heard Mrs. Rose's voice.

"THERE YOU TWO ARE!" Mrs. Rose shouted, not sounding pleased with us. "I have been looking all over for you two. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I-I- We- We-" I stuttered, unsure of how to answer it.

"You know what, it doesn't matter. I'm just glad you two are okay." Mrs. Rose sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "But be ready for

the lecture of a lifetime when your father hears of this."

'And the grounding of a lifetime.' I mentally winced.

"So the dog brought you two here. To this cabin."

"Yes." Marissa answered as Silverdog ran to the small cabin on the other side of the field.

"Hopefully, whoever sent Silverdog is still there." Mrs. Rose said, eyeing the cabin before motioning for us to follow her.

The cabin stood silvery gray under the moonlight. It had one narrow door and one square window under a slanted red roof. A stone fireplace stood beside the cabin. Some kind of barbecue grill, I guessed. Beside the fireplace, I saw a low pile of firewood neatly stacked. I could see no lights on inside the cabin. No sign that anyone lived there. Silverdog pranced up to the tiny building, pushed in the door with his snout, and disappeared inside. We hesitated at the edge of the clearing. We watched the cabin, waiting for someone to come out. The door remained half-open. We took a few steps closer.

"This is where he wanted to bring us." Marissa murmured, her eyes on the cabin door. "Silverdog sure seemed happy to get home. Did you see the way he strutted? Do you think the person who wants to help us is inside?"

"Only one way to find out." Mrs. Rose answered.

"The cabin looks almost like a fairy-tale cabin. Like a cabin in one of Dad's old stories. Maybe it's made out of cookies and candy."

"Yeah. Right." I rolled my eyes.

"Do you remember the story?"

"Please! No stories!" I begged. "Come on. Let's check out the place."

"Hold on. Stay by my side, and don't you dare leave." Mrs. Rose warned as we stepped up to the cabin. And to our surprise, the whole building was only a few feet taller than Mrs. Rose.

"Hello?" I called.

No answer.

"Anyone home?"

No answer.

"Is anyone home?" Mrs. Rose shouted, knocking on the door.

No answer.

Mrs. Rose pushed open the door and entered the building, followed by Marissa and me. We found ourselves in a warm kitchen. Light from a candle on a small table flickered over the wall. I saw a crusty loaf of bread on the sink counter with a carving knife beside it. I saw a big black pot simmering on a wood-burning stove. It sent a sweet, tangy aroma floating through the room. We didn't have time to see anything else. As soon as we took one step into the small kitchen, a figure burst in from a back room.

It was a very large woman wearing a long, flowing gray dress. She had flashing, bright green eyes. Blond bangs fell across her forehead, and long braids hung down the sides of her round-cheeked face. She wore a helmet over her head. A cone-shaped helmet with two horns poking up from the sides. Like a Viking from long ago. Or someone in an opera.

Her arms were big, with powerful muscles. She had sparkling rings on every finger. A round, jeweled medallion swung heavily over her chest. She dove quickly past us, her green eyes wild, her mouth twisted in an evil grin. She slammed the cabin door shut and pressed her back against it.

"I've caught you!" The lady shrieked before cackling. Her cruel laugh ended in a cough. Her green eyes sparkled at us, reflecting the candlelight. She stared at us hungrily.

"Are you sure about that?" Mrs. Rose asked, taking out her scythe.

"Let us go!"

Those were the words I wanted to shout. But when I opened my mouth, only a tiny squeak slipped out. Marissa moved first. She dove for the door. I forced my rubbery legs into action and followed close behind.

"Let us out!" I finally managed to scream. "You can't keep us here!"

"Take it easy, kids." The lady's voice boomed. She had a loud, deep voice. "I was just kidding."

"EXCUSE ME!?" Marissa and I shouted.

"Just... kidding?" Mrs. Rose asked, unsure if she heard right.

"Sorry. I have a bad sense of humor." The woman said. "I guess it comes from living out here in the middle of the forest with hardly anyone to ever talk to. I can't resist a really mean joke."

"I... guess that makes sense." Mrs. Rose said, still holding her weapon.

"You mean you didn't lock us in?" I demanded in a trembling voice. "You haven't captured us?"

"I haven't captured you. I sent Silverdog so that I could help you." The lady said, shaking her head. She suddenly reminded me of a large, gray bull.

She then pointed toward the stove. I saw that the big white dog had dropped down beside it. He lowered his head, licking a big front paw. But he kept his eyes on us. My sister and I stayed near the door

while Mrs. Rose stayed in front of us to protect us in case the strange lady tried to attack us. This woman was weird and kind of terrifying. She was so big, loud, and powerful-looking. And those green eyes flashed and danced wildly beneath the horned helmet.

'Is she totally crazy?' I wondered. *'Did she really bring us here to help us?'*

"I know everything that happens in this forest." The lady said mysteriously. She raised the jeweled medallion close to her face and stared into it. "I have ways of seeing things. Nothing escapes me."

"Are you like the guardian of this place?" Mrs. Rose asked, staring at the jewel.

"In a sense, you could say that."

I glanced at Marissa. Her eyes were wide with fright. Her hand reached for the cabin door. Back by the stove, Silverdog yawned. He lowered his head between his paws.

"What are your names?" The woman boomed. She let the heavy medallion drop back onto her chest. "My name is Ivanna. Do you know what Ivanna means?"

"Uh... no." I answered.

"I don't either!" The woman exclaimed. She tossed back her head in another cackling laugh. The medallion bounced on her chest. Her helmet nearly toppled off her blond hair. "Anyway. What are your names?"

"I am Mrs. Rose. This is Justin and his sister Marissa." Mrs. Rose answered.

"Do they mean anything?"

"No. They are just names." Mrs. Rose answered.

While I wasn't sure about my name or Marissa's name, I felt like there was a meaning behind Mrs. Rose's name. But whether it was true or not, I couldn't think about it since, despite the warmth of the kitchen, I was still shivering. We had walked so far through the cold forest. I couldn't shake off the chill.

"You two look half-frozen." Ivanna said, studying our faces. "I think I know what you need. Hot soup. Sit down. You too, Mrs. Rose. You look like you could have something warm as well."

Ivanna motioned to a small wooden table with three chairs in the corner of the room. Marissa and I hesitated as we didn't want to leave the door. I knew we both were still thinking of making a run for it.

"Our dad..." Marissa murmured. "He'll be looking for us. He might be here any minute."

"Why didn't you bring him along?" Ivana asked, stepping to the stove. She pulled down three bowls from a cabinet.

"We couldn't wake him up." I blurted out, causing Marissa to glare at me.

"A heavy sleeper, huh?" Ivanna had her back to us. She was ladling some soup from the black pot into the bowls.

"One of the heaviest I have seen." Mrs. Rose said, stepping to the side so she could see Ivanna and make sure she didn't 'add' anything to the soups.

"If we want to escape, now is our chance." I whispered to Marissa. She glanced at the door before turning back to me.

"I'm so cold." Marissa whispered. "And the soup smells so good."

"Sit down." Ivanna ordered in her deep, booming voice. Looking at each other, we headed to the table and sat down with Mrs. Rose

sitting between us. Ivanna set the steaming bowls in front of us. Her green eyes lit up as she smiled. "Hot chicken noodle soup. It will warm you and get you ready for your test."

"Huh? Test?" I asked.

"What test?" Mrs. Rose asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Eat. Eat." Ivanna ordered as she stepped back to the stove. "Warm yourselves."

I watched her bend to pet Silverdog's head. Then, I raised the soup spoon to my mouth and Blew on it before swallowing. It was delicious. And it felt so warm and soothing on my dry throat. I took a few more spoonfuls. Then I glanced across the table. Marissa seemed to be enjoying it, too. However, Mrs. Rose didn't seem to be hungry, as she had yet to take a single bite. I had nearly raised a spoonful of noodles to my mouth when Ivanna spun toward us from the sink. Her eyes went wide. Her mouth dropped open. She pointed at us with a trembling finger.

"You haven't eaten any of it, have you?" She asked.

"Huh?" Marissa and I asked, confused.

"Whatever you do, don't eat it!" Ivanna cried.

"Why?" Mrs. Rose asked through narrow eyes.

"I-I just remembered. It's poison!"

The spoon dropped from my hand and splashed into the bowl. I grabbed my stomach, waiting for the pain to begin. I glanced over at Marissa - and saw her roll her eyes.

"Another joke?" Marissa asked.

"Another joke!" Ivanna confessed gleefully, causing Marissa and I to sigh in relief while Mrs. Rose took her first bite.

Once again, Ivanna roared with laughter. I swallowed hard. Why didn't I guess it was another one of the woman's mean jokes? I hate it when Marissa catches on to things before I do!

"I knew it all along." I muttered. Ivanna stepped up to the table, the medallion bouncing as she walked.

"The soup isn't poison. But don't eat it yet." Ivanna instructed. "I want to read the noodles."

"Excuse me?" I replied.

"Like a fortune teller?" Mrs. Rose asked, skeptical.

"Yes. But real one. Not like those others." Ivanna answered as she leaned over my bowl, bringing her face so close that the steam misted her cheeks. She studied the noodles in my bowl before studying Marissa's. "Chicken soup noodles foretell your fate."

"This is strange." Mrs. Rose muttered.

"Hmmmm. Hmmmm. Yes. Hmmmm hmmmm." Ivanna muttered. Finally, she stood up and crossed her powerful arms over her chest. Her cheeks were red from the hot steam of the soup. "Eat. Eat your soup now. Before it gets cold."

"What did you see?" I asked. "In the noodles. What did they tell you?"

"You must take the test in the morning. I was right. I know why you have come to the forest. I know what you seek."

"You mean you're going to help us find the totem?" Mrs. Rose asked. For a second, I was about to correct her, but Marissa motioned for me to keep quiet. But it was then that I realized why Mrs. Rose lied.

"No. The manuscript of the Legend of the Lost Legend. I can help you find it. But first, you must take the test." Ivanna said, either easily seeing through the lie or having actually 'read' the noodles.

"Uh... what kind of test?" I asked.

"A survival test."

"I was afraid of that." I muttered, swallowing hard.

"What if we don't want to take your survival test?" Marissa asked.

"Then you will never find the silver chest!" Ivanna declared heatedly. It sounded like she wanted us to find it. I would have questioned it had I not been overwhelmed with joy.

"Wow! You do know what we're looking for!" I exclaimed, earning a nod from Ivanna.

"I know everything in this forest."

"But-but we need our dad!" Marissa stammered. Ivanna shook her head.

"There is no time. You will take the test in his place. Do not worry. It is not a difficult test. If you stay alive."

"Of course. You can't do anything if you're dead." Mrs. Rose said. "Unless you're in the military and joking."

"Huh? If we stay alive? Is that one of your jokes?" I asked weakly.

"No." Ivanna replied, shaking her head. "No joke. I never joke about the test in the Fantasy Forest."

"Fantasy Forest? Where's that? What is it?" I asked, my spoon falling to the table.

Ivanna opened her mouth to answer. But before she could say a word, the cabin door burst open. I felt a blast of cold air. And then a wild creature, covered in black fur, scrabbled into the room on all fours. Snarling, it cast its bulging black eyes around the room. Then it snapped its jagged teeth and, with a hoarse growl, leaped to attack

me. But before it could get anywhere near me, Mrs. Rose pulled me and Marissa out of the way. Then, without losing any momentum, she spun around, grabbed the creature, and threw it back to the door.

"Woah." Marissa and I said, amazed at what Summer did.

"Down, Luka! Get down! Off, Luka! Get off!" Ivanna boomed. The creature growled as it shook itself. As we calmed down, I stared at the creature and saw that it had a man's face. Hunched on its hind legs, it looked almost human, except that it was covered with thick, black fur. "Get back, Luka! Back!"

"Is that your dog?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Yes. Luka is my dog. Don't be scared of him. He's a good boy." Ivanna answered as Luka moved next to her.

"What-what is he?" I asked, moving to stand behind Mrs. Rose.

"I'm not sure." Ivanna replied, grinning at the furry thing.

"You're... not... sure?" Mrs. Rose asked, raising an eyebrow as Luka hopped up and down, grinning and making grunting sounds.

"Yes. Luka was brought up by wolves." Ivanna said. "But he's a good boy. Aren't you, Luka?"

Luka nodded. His tongue hung out of his open mouth. He panted like a dog. Ivanna petted his long, shaggy hair. He broke away from her and charged at me again. He sniffed my sweatshirt and jeans. Then Luka crawled under the table and sniffed Marissa's hiking boots.

"Get away, Luka! Off! Off!" Ivanna ordered before turning to us. "He's a good boy. He's just nosy. He'll calm down - once he gets to know you."

"Gets to know us?" Marissa asked, watching Luka scurry over to Silverdog by the stove.

"In what way?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Not the way you are thinking. Luka will be a big help to you when you enter the Fantasy Forest." Ivanna answered, smiling.

"He's coming with us?" I cried.

"He will be your guide. And he will protect you." Her expression turned solemn. Then she added softly. "You need all the help you can get. This forest is not like others. Regular help won't be enough. You need one who is familiar."

We finished our soup quickly. Silverdog and Luka watched us from beside the stove. When we finished, Ivanna led us to a small back room. The room was bare except for three cots.

"You will sleep here." Ivanna said.

"But our dad -" Marissa started.

"Ivanna raised a hand to silence her. "You want to find the silver chest - don't you? You want to surprise your father and make him proud - don't you?" Ivanna said, raising a hand to silence Marissa. Marissa and I nodded. "Then you will take the test. If you pass it, I will tell you how to find the chest."

"Will you also show us how to escape the forest?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Yes. I will make you a map to leave. Sleep quickly. The test begins first thing in the morning." Ivanna said before leaving.

"I don't trust this." Mrs. Rose said before turning to us. "Go to sleep, you two. I will keep watch."

Nodding, Marissa and I went to the cots and fell asleep quicker than we thought.

Next Morning

I awoke slowly, stretched, turned, and reached to push the blanket off me. No blanket. Had I kicked it onto the floor? I blinked several times, trying to clear the sleep from my eyes.

How long had I slept?

Sunlight streamed all around. Yawning, I sat up and started to climb off the cot. But the cot had disappeared, too.

"Hey!" I cried out when I realized the cabin had also disappeared. "Where am I?"

I was sitting on the grass, fully dressed. I blinked, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the bright morning sunlight. The grass still shimmered wetly from the morning dew. I stood up. My mouth was dry for some reason.

Looking around, I saw nothing but forest. My mind whirled. Ivanna had said the test would begin first thing in the morning. Had it already started? Was I in the Fantasy Forest? Had the test begun before I awoke?

"Where are we?" I asked, my voice still hoarse from sleep. "Do you think-"

I stopped with a gasp when I realized neither Marissa nor Mrs. Rose was there. I was alone.

Alone in the middle of the forest!

"Marissa? Mrs. Rose!?" I called, feeling the panic tighten my chest. Where were they? Where was I? "Marissa? Mrs. Rose?"

My voice cracked. My throat tightened. I heard a low growl from the trees. The thud and crackle of heavy animal footsteps sounded too close for comfort. I turned to the sound and watched Luka come hopping out of the forest. He stood on his two feet like a man. But

Luka hopped like a rabbit. Scratching the thick fur on one leg, he grinned at me as he came near. I didn't grin back.

"Where is Marissa? Where is my sister?" I demanded. Luka tilted his head and stared at me, confused. "Marissa! Where is Marissa?"

"Over here!" I jumped when I heard her voice.

"Where are you?" I called. I saw a flash of her red hair. Then she poked her head out from behind a wide, leafy bush.

"Over here." Marissa answered. "You were still asleep. So I thought I'd explore."

"Even though I told her to stay by your side while I looked around to see if we were safe." Mrs. Rose added from behind me, further scaring me.

"You two scared me to death!" I shouted. Calming down, we began trotting through the tall grass and weeds, eager to join Marissa. "Where are we? What happened to Ivanna's cabin?"

"Beats me. I woke up - and here we were." Marissa answered, shrugging.

"That's another reason why I looked around. I wanted to see if the cabin disappeared or if we were moved." Mrs. Rose added.

"Didn't you stay up all night?" I asked, curious as to how something got past Mrs. Rose.

"I was. But one moment, I blinked, and the next, we were here."

"Magic?" Marissa suggested.

"Perhaps, but I doubt it." Behind us, Luka growled. I turned and saw him pawing the dirt like a dog.

"Do you think he's part human?" I whispered.

"Not sure." Mrs. Rose answered while Marissa didn't seem to hear me. Instead, she pointed to a spot between two trees.

"I found a path over there. Do you think we're supposed to follow it?" Marissa asked.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do." I answered. "Ivanna never explained anything to us."

"Which makes me question everything." Mrs. Rose said.

"I think that means we're supposed to stay alive." she said softly. "I think that's how we pass the test."

"But where do we go? What do we do?" I cried.

I could feel myself start to lose control. I felt angry, frightened, and confused - all at the same time. Luka uttered another growl. He stopped digging up the dirt and came staggering over to us, standing up like a human. If he shaved off all the fur, put on some clothes, and got a haircut, he'd look like a young man. As I stared at him, he started to wave and point.

"What is he doing?" I asked. Luka grunted excitedly. He waved a furry hand at us and jabbed his other hand toward the trees.

"I think he wants us to follow him." Marissa said.

"Possibly. Ivanna did say that we needed someone who knew the forest to pass the test." Mrs. Rose said. Grunting and waving, Luka headed for the trees.

"Can we trust him?" I asked.

"Do we have a choice?" Marissa shrugged.

"But we should stay alert. This could still be a trap." Mrs. Rose said.

Luka stepped onto a path that led through the forest. The trail curved behind a clump of tall, yellow-leafed bushes. I saw his head bobbing above the bushes. Then he disappeared.

"Hurry! We'd better not let him get out of sight." I shouted. I glanced down and saw three black backpacks on the grass. I bent down, grabbed one, and unzipped it. Empty. I handed the other backpack to Marissa. "Ivanna must have left these for us. They're empty."

"Maybe part of the test is to bring something back. Or it's to help us carry things we need to survive. Either way, we should take them." Mrs. Rose said, taking one and putting it on.

Nodding, we pulled the backpacks onto our backs. Then we jogged to the path and hurried to catch up with the bouncing, hopping Luka. He stopped to sniff a weed. Then, he continued shuffling along the path. We followed close behind. Two or three times, Luka turned back to make sure we were following. The path curved between prickly weeds and tall reeds. We passed a small, round pond that reflected the blue sky. The air became warmer and wet. The back of my neck felt hot and prickly. We entered a cluster of trees with smooth, white trunks. The trees grew close together. The smooth bark of the trunks felt cool against my hot hands.

"Where is he taking us?" Marissa whispered.

We didn't answer her. I didn't know. I only knew that Luka was leading us deeper and deeper into this forest. We squeezed our way through the white-trunked trees and came out in a large, grassy clearing. Small gray rocks poked up from the grass. The slender white trees formed a circle around the clearing. My boots crunched over the ground as we followed Luka across the grass. I looked down to see what made the crunching sound and discovered that the floor was covered with large brown nuts. Curious, I picked one up.

"Check this out." I said. I turned and saw that she had picked up two of them. "They must have fallen off the white trees."

"They look like walnuts. But they're bigger than eggs!" Marissa said. "I never saw walnuts this big!"

"Neither have I. Nor have I ever felt... walnuts that were this unnaturally hot." Mrs. Rose said, carefully picking her words while silently thanking the Brothers above that Justin and Marissa were only pre-teens and not teens.

"I guess it's from the sun beating down on them." I said, looking up at the sky.

"Hey! Whoa!" Marissa's cry made us look up.

We saw a gray creature scamper across the clearing. At first, I thought it was a dog or a giant cat. Then I realized it was a squirrel. It carried one of the large nuts in its front paws. And it hopped quickly toward the trees, its bushy gray tail floating behind it like a pennant. I turned as Luka let out a hoarse cry. I saw him stand straight up with his eyes going wide with excitement. He let out another cry, leaned forward, and reached out both hands. Luka barked once before chasing the squirrel. The squirrel saw Luka coming. It dropped the nut and took off at full speed into the white trees. Luka dropped to all fours and galloped after it.

"No, Luka! Come back!" Marissa shouted.

"Come back! Come back!" We all shouted. "Luka! Come back!"

Real World

"So, did the cabin actually disappear, or was it magic?" Yang asked.

"Or were you possibly drugged?" Coco asked.

"I'm still not sure. I spent the night watching the door to ensure Justin and Marissa were safe. But I blinked, and we were in the clearing." Summer answered. "But I doubt it was drugs since I didn't eat any of

the soup. The kids think I did, but I didn't. That is unless the scent itself was what knocked us out."

"That is highly unlikely. Still, it could have been something that's native to that forest." Weiss said.

"Also, is it true that the dog, Luka, looked strangely human-like?" Velvet asked.

"I don't want to give anything away since the answer will come soon." Summer answered.

"Alright."

"What about the Ivanna character?" Ren asked.

"Yeah. She seemed kind of strange and... almost unnatural. I'm not sure if that's the correct word." Yatsuhashi said.

"She was. But you'll learn why in a bit. And it was something I wasn't expecting at all." Summer answered. "Any other questions, or shall I continue?"

"I have one last question." Nora answered.

"And I have one as well." Blake said.

"What are they?" Summer asked.

"What was Mr. Clarke doing while all this happened?" Nora asked.

"He was sleeping. The kids were not kidding when they said he was a heavy sleeper. But he did wake up eventually to go searching for us." Summer answered. "And the other question."

"You said that the animals in the forest were big. How big were they?" Blake asked.

"Pretty big. That squirrel was about twice the size of Zwei."

"Damn. That's one big squirrel." Jaune said, writing it down.

"It was. But there is a reason for it." Summer said before taking another sip of her coffee. "Anything else?"

"No. I would say that's it." Pyrrha answered.

"Alright then. Let's continue." Summer said as she put down her cup. "Knowing that we couldn't lose her, we began to chase after Luka. I would have been able to get her easily, but the forest was so dense that it made going through it a challenge. As we chased after him, Marissa and Justin kept calling after him. But for some reason, their voices echoed. It sounded like there were a dozen of them in the forest. Yet, we barely paid attention to that as we focused on getting Luka back."

Story

"Luka! Come back!" Marissa's cry echoed.

As we called after him, it sounded as if there were dozens of us in the forest, all chasing after him, all frantically calling for him to stop chasing that squirrel and come back to us.

"Whoa!" I cried out as I tried to slip through the narrow space between two white tree trunks, and my backpack caught between the trees. "Ow!"

"Are you alright, Justin?" Mrs. Rose asked, freeing me.

"Yes. Thanks, Mrs. Rose." I said as we continued running after Luka.

"Luka! Hey! Luka!" I could hear Marissa's cry up ahead of us now. A few seconds later, we caught up with my sister. She had stopped running and was trying to catch her breath.

"Where is he?" I asked. "Do you see him? Where did he go?"

"I-I lost him. I don't even hear him anymore." Marissa answered breathlessly. I listened hard. The forest was silent now. No footsteps. No growls. The leaves above us brushed together, making a soft, whispering sound.

"But how could he run away? He's supposed to be our guide!"

"I think he really wanted to catch that squirrel." Marissa said quietly.

"But-but-" I sputtered. "He can't just run away and leave us all by ourselves here."

"Remember what Ivanna said, Justin. Luka was raised by wolves. And he is still a dog. So, his instincts must have kicked in, making him chase the squirrel." Mrs. Rose said.

"That's true. But why do dogs chase squirrels?" Marrisa asked, earning a shrug from Mrs. Rose.

"Still. We have to find him!" I shouted. "Come on. We have to keep going. We can't let him-"

"How can we find him, Justin? Which way should we go?" Marissa asked, shaking her head.

"Don't even think about splitting up." Mrs. Rose warned. And even though her voice sounded neutral and concerned, Marissa and I could tell that she did not want to go chasing after us while we were here.

"We can follow Luka's footprints." I suggested. I lowered my gaze to the ground. A thick carpet of brown leaves spread over the dirt.

No footprints.

"Good guess, though, Justin." Mrs. Rose said.

"I think he was heading that way." I said, pointing to the trees.

"I don't think so. He's gone, Justin." Marissa said, pushing herself away from the tree. I spun around, frantically searching for him, searching for any sign of him. But I stopped when Marissa spoke again. "Hey - what's that?"

"Huh?" I turned back to her.

"What's what?" Mrs. Rose asked, curious.

"In Justin's back pocket. What is it?" Marissa asked. Confused, I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a folded-up sheet of paper. My hands were sweaty and stuck to the paper, but I unfolded it quickly.

"It's some kind of a note." I answered. "In a tiny handwriting."

"Let me see it." Mrs. Rose said. Nodding, I gave her the note.

"What does it say?" Marissa asked.

"It's from Ivanna."

"What did she write?" I asked.

"It's instructions. Well, sort of." Mrs. Rose answered. "It says: " **DEAR KIDS, KEEP LUKA WITH YOU, AND YOU WILL PASS THE TEST. DO NOT LET HIM OUT OF YOUR SIGHT. BE CAREFUL NOT TO LOSE HIM, OR YOU ARE DOOMED.** "

"Well, too late for that." I said.

"So, what now?" Marissa asked.

"Let's head back to the clearing. From there, we can think about how to proceed there." Mrs. Rose answered.

Nodding, we made our way slowly back to the clearing. The grass swayed under a soft breeze. Our boots crunched over the large nuts in the grass. I looked over Ivanna's note in my hand. I glanced over it

one more time, hoping it didn't say what it said. Then I angrily balled it up and tossed it away. Marissa trudged along beside me. The sun beat down on us. We were both sweating.

"Maybe if we wait here, Luka will come back." Marissa said.

"I want to say yes, but I doubt it." Mrs. Rose said.

"He isn't coming back." I groaned. "He is probably miles away, still chasing after that squirrel."

"Then what do we do next?" Marissa demanded. "How do we pass the test?"

"We can't pass the test. You heard what the note said. We're doomed." I said, sighing.

"Well, we can try." Marissa said as we crossed the clearing.

"Marissa is right. We have to try something." Mrs. Rose said.

I was about to say something but stopped myself when we heard a loud, startling sound. It sounded like a loud snap, almost like someone broke a pencil in two. Then a crack - soft at first, and then louder. I stopped and whirled around. I expected to see Luka come bounding out of the forest. But I saw only the tall, white trees. No one was there. I heard another sharp snap followed by another and another. And then I heard cracking all around.

'The earth is cracking open!' I thought. I pictured the ground splitting apart with a dark hole opening up. And then all of us falling, falling down into it. The Pit With No Bottom! I wished Dad had never told us that story! But I was snapped out of my thoughts when Marissa grabbed my shoulders.

"Justin - look!" She said. I gazed down. The ground hadn't split open. But the snapping and cracking echoed all around. And it was getting louder.

"Ohh!" I weakly said when I realized, to my horror, that the grass was moving. I could feel it move under my feet.

"What's happening?" Marissa cried.

"Kids. Stay near me." Mrs. Rose said, placing her hands on our shoulders.

"That sound!" Marissa shouted, scared. The cracking grew louder, rising up from the ground. Now, it sounded as if all the trees were cracking apart while the grass swayed and bent.

"It's the nuts!" I shouted. "Look! They're all cracking open!"

I covered my ears against the sound and stared at the nuts, bouncing and trembling all around our feet. They were cracking open, splitting apart. Hundreds and hundreds of them. The whole clearing. The ground was shaking as they all cracked apart.

Cracked into pieces!

Crumbled around us!

We stared in amazement at the cracking nuts. And then, Marissa and I both screamed in shock when we saw what came climbing out. Staring down as a nut split open, I saw a creature with gnashing teeth, tiny black eyes, and a twitching black nose. The creature pushed itself up. I saw spindly front legs and a slender body of gray fur.

"A mouse!" I choked out.

"Hundreds of them!" Marissa cried.

"I don't think those are ordinary mice." Mrs. Rose said, readying herself.

The nuts were splitting apart all across the clearing. So many of them, it made the grass quiver and the ground appear to shake. I

stood frozen in place, watching mice hatch around my feet. They pushed out slowly, poking their heads out first, sniffing the air, and trying out their pointy teeth. The nuts rocked onto their sides and cracked apart, with gray bodies slithering out. Sticklike back legs kicked their way out from the empty shells.

"They're not nuts! They're eggs!" Marissa shouted.

"But mice don't come from eggs!" I said.

"I guess no one told these mice!"

A mouse scampered over my boots. Mice were scurrying through the tall grass, making the grass whisper. Another gray body slithered over my boots. However, it only stayed there for a second as Mrs. Rose kicked it away.

"Let's get out of here!" I shouted.

But so many mice scampered over the grass, so many gray bodies slithered at our feet - we couldn't move. Even Mrs. Rose was having a tough time keeping the mice away from us. Shrill squeaks rose up from the grass as the creatures found their voices. "Eee eee eee eee!" The sound surrounded us and grew louder and louder to the point where it drowned out the whisper of the grass. It got to the point where Marissa and I had to cover our ears.

"Eee eee eee eee!"

"We have to run!" I shouted.

"But the ground is covered!" Marissa shrieked.

"If we run -"

"YOWWWWW!" I let out a cry as I felt a mouse drop inside one of my hiking boots. Its tiny feet scratched through my wool socks. I bent down to pull it out - and saw two more mice clinging by their teeth to my pants cuff. "Hey -"

In my attempts to get the mice off, I had lost my balance. And I would have fallen to my knees had Mrs. Rose not caught me and pulled me back to my feet.

"Thanks, Mrs. Rose." I said, earning a quick nod from her.

"Hellllp!" Marissa shouted. I turned and saw her bent over, hands raised, struggling to pull two mice from her hair. Another mouse chewed the bottom of her sweatshirt. Two more mice climbed a leg of her jeans. Mice clung to her backpack. "Helllp me! Helllp!"

I was about to go and help her but felt a mouse slither under my sweatshirt. I felt its prickly feet move across my chest. Then, I felt a sharp stab of pain in the middle of my back. Did it bite me? Mice jumped onto my shoulders and crawled over the back of my neck. Some swarmed over my backpack. Swinging both hands wildly, I tried to brush them off me.

But there were too many of them!

Squeaking! Snapping! Clinging to my clothes. My wrists. My hair.

"Hellllllp! Hellllp!"

I pulled a mouse from my ear and tossed it across the grass. I could feel a bunch of them crawling over my bare skin under my sweatshirt. Another sharp bite made me cry out - and I dropped facedown onto the grass - onto more mice! I tried to swat the mice away. But there were too many. Way too many.

I turned and saw them swarming over Marissa. She cried out as she spun around, swinging her arms, trying to shake the mice off. I wanted to help her. But there were too many. My whole body tingled and itched. Looking over at Mrs. Rose, I saw that she was doing her best to keep hundreds, if not thousands, of strange mice away from us. Yet, there were simply too many.

The squeaking, chattering mice swarmed over me, keeping me from moving to help Marissa. Prickling me, scratching me, biting me - the mice kept at it until I could barely move.

"Off! Get off!" I managed to cry.

I swiped at my face, slapping two mice off my cheeks. I pulled one, squeaking and squirming, from my hair and pulled another one off my forehead. I kicked my legs and swung my arms, frantically trying to free myself.

"Oww!" I screamed as a fat, gray mouse scratched at my ear. I reached up, grabbed and squeezed it. The mouse gave a soft groan before collapsing. "Huh?"

I felt something hard above its furry gray belly. It felt Like a bump. I slapped away two other mice and examined the one in my hand. I pushed the tiny, hard bump. The mouse started to squirm and struggle. I pushed the bump again. The mouse slumped in my hand, silent and still.

"It's an on-off switch!" I screamed.

I turned to Marissa. She had fallen to her knees as dozens of mice swarmed over her. They covered her sweatshirt and crawled through her hair.

"It's an on-off switch! Marissa! Squeeze the button on their front. You can turn them off!" I shouted to her. I grabbed a mouse off my neck and squeezed the button, shutting it off. I then grabbed two more before doing the same. "They're not real! The mice! They're fakes! They're little machines!"

"Then that means I don't need to hold back anymore." Mrs. Rose said. She then took out her scythe and, in an instant, wiped out hundreds of the fake mice.

"Weird! This is so weird!" Marissa said, standing up while brushing some mice off her clothes and turning off some others.

"We've got to get out of here." I said. "We've got to find Luka."

"Do you think this was the test? Do you think we passed it?"

"I don't know. I don't care about the test right now. I just want to get away from these dumb mechanical mice."

"Unfortunately, I feel like this was only the first part of the test." Mrs. Rose said. "Still, we should leave this place."

I brushed two more off the front of my jeans. Then I reached for Marissa. I pulled a mouse off her shoulder, clicked it off, and tossed it away. We then followed Mrs. Rose as she ran toward the trees. Mice scurried under our feet. Their shrill squeaks echoed all around us. Despite destroying lots of them, it seemed like there was an infinite amount of fake mice. We even lost count of how many mice we stepped on as we ran. But we didn't care. We knew they weren't real. We knew they were mechanical. We were nearly out of the clearing when I stopped suddenly. I had an idea. I bent down and started scooping up mice.

"Wait up!" I called to the others. They didn't hear me. They kept running toward the trees. "Wait up! I'll be right there!"

Bending down, I picked up a few handfuls of mice and clicked them off. Then I shoved them into my backpack. These will be awesome for playing jokes on people back home! They're so lifelike. Can you imagine the fun I'll have with these in Miss Olsen's class? I shoved eight or nine more of them into the pack and closed it up.

Once done, I climbed to my feet and ran after the others. I glanced back once and saw the mice, thousands of them, crawling over each other, crawling in wild circles through the grass. Then I turned and ran, following Marissa and Mrs. Rose into the safety of the white-

trunked trees. I was so eager to get away from that clearing and the squeaking, scurrying mice that I could barely make anything out.

"Marissa! Mrs. Rose! Wait up!" I shouted. They were far ahead, running fast. "Wait up!"

And then I uttered a sharp cry as I ran full-force into a tree. I felt the air burst from my lungs. I saw red and yellow stars dancing in the pure white sky. Gasping for breath, I reached for the tree trunk. I heard a cracking sound. So loud. And close.

The tree!

The tree I had run into - it started to fall!

"Look out!" I shouted to Marissa. But she realized it too late. Thankfully, Mrs. Rose didn't and managed to pull Marissa out of the way.

"Wow. Thank you, Mrs. Rose." Marissa panted as the tall, white tree hit the ground.

"Yes. Thanks for saving my sister, Mrs. Rose." I said, running up to them.

"You're welcome." Mrs. Rose said, smiling.

"You know. The tree crashing didn't sound as loud as I thought it would." Marissa said, making me pause as I realized she was right.

"Yeah." I said, looking back at the tree.

"And that's because it's a fake." Mrs. Rose said after effortlessly kicking it away.

"It's made out of plaster or something. Check it out." Marissa said, tugging off a chunk of the tree trunk. "Check it out, Justin."

"Yeah." I said, tearing a piece of the tree off. I squeezed it, and it turned to powder in my hand. "Do you think the trees are all fake? The whole forest?"

"Maybe. Who knows. But that just means we have to be extra careful from now on." Mrs. Rose said as she unfurled her scythe again. "But this should speed things up."

Nodding, I got up, and we followed Mrs. Rose as she cut down all the fake trees faster than any lumberjack I saw on television. The trunks were helpless against Mrs. Roses's attacks. But Marissa and I did have to keep our heads low and zig-zag occasionally so we didn't get hit by any of the falling fake trees.

"Fake. It's all a fake!" Marissa declared. A smile spread over her face as she started running at a nearby tree. "That looks like fun."

"No! Not that one!" I screamed.

I guess Marissa couldn't stop in time. She slammed her shoulder into the tree. She raised both fists over her head in triumph as the tree toppled over. But Marisa didn't have much time to cheer. As the white trunk fell, we heard the hard flutter of wings. And we watched in horror as dark forms fluttered up from the fallen limbs.

I had seen the bats, dozens of black bats, clinging upside down on the tree limbs. I had seen them. But I hadn't warned Marissa in time. And now the bats all came flapping up, chittering angrily, their sleep interrupted. Hissing and shrieking at us, they surrounded us and began to circle. I could feel the warm breeze from their flapping wings. Faster. Faster, they circled. But they kept a distance as Mrs. Rose quickly stopped cutting down the trees and used her scythe to put distance between the bats and us.

"Are they fake, too?" Marissa asked in a tiny voice.

"I-I don't think so." I stammered as a few tried to swoop in. But they were beaten back by Mrs. Rose's scythe.

However, Marissa and I still ducked out of fear and instinct. I shut my eyes and covered my head with my hands as I waited. The sound of a deep boom rose over the shrill chittering of the bats.

The ground shook.

'Thunder?' I wondered.

Another boom, low at first, then loud as an explosion. I raised my head in time to see the white trees tremble. The bats stopped their shrieking. Their wings shot up, stretched out. Another boom of thunder sent them racing back up to the sky. I watched them flutter up, rising, rising above the trees, rising against the bright sky until they seemed to disappear into the sun.

"We're safe." Marissa said as she climbed to her feet slowly.

"I wouldn't say that. Something scared them away. And from the sound of it, it must have been big." Mrs. Rose said.

"Yeah. What was that sound?" I asked, tensing when we heard another thunderous boom. But it was closer this time. We felt the ground shake. A tree tottered, then came toppling to the ground.

"It can't be thunder." Marissa said, pointing to the sky. "No clouds or anything."

Another boom.

Closer.

"I-I know what it is." I stammered.

"What is it?" Mrs. Rose asked as another boom shook the trees.

"Footsteps," I murmured. "Coming toward us. I know it's footsteps."

"Justin! You're letting your crazy imagination run away with you. Again!" Marissa said, slightly annoyed.

"No. I'm right." I insisted. "Footsteps."

"Are you losing it? What could make footsteps that loud? It would have to be... " Her voice trailed off.

Another boom.

I let my crazy imagination run away with me. I couldn't help it. I pictured a dinosaur. A Tyrannosaurus rex lumbering through the trees. Or maybe one of those fat ones with the long, skinny necks.

Booooooom! Booooom!

Or maybe two of them!

"Well, whatever it is, it is getting closer." Mrs. Rose said.

"Well, Ivanna said this was a test of survival." Marissa whispered. "But-"

So far, it has been a test of our running skills! Well, and maybe novice training for Mrs. Rose since she is a huntress. But I didn't care. There was no way I wanted to stick around to see what this giant creature was. As we turned and started to run in the opposite direction, a shadow fell over us. I gazed up to see if clouds had blocked the sun. But I saw no clouds overhead. The shadow was cast by the creature, thundering closer and closer behind us. I heard trees crunching underfoot. The ground shook. The heavy footsteps boomed close behind us. How tall was it? I glanced back but could see only quivering trees.

Booooom! Booooom!

My knees buckled as the ground shook under my feet. Marissa and I ran side by side while Mrs. Rose cut down all the trees behind us in an attempt to slow down the creature. We hurtled through the trees as fast as we could, gasping for breath as we ran. But we couldn't

run out of the shadow. No matter how hard we ran, it floated over us, cold and dark.

Booooom! Booooom!

So close now. So close that every footstep made us leap into the air. My heart thudded. My temples throbbed. Marissa and I forced ourselves to keep running, desperate to escape and run out from under the wide shadow that seemed to hold us prisoner. We ran until we reached a stream. We both stopped inches from the muddy shore and stared down into the fast-flowing, blue water.

"Now what? Now what?" I cried breathlessly as the shadow darkened as the creature moved over us.

"Look. You can see the bottom. It looks really shallow. Maybe we can walk across it. Or swim if we have to."

Boooom! Boooom!

"It looks like we have no choice but to cross it." Mrs. Rose said. While she was positive she could handle whatever was causing the sound, Mrs. Rose did not want to risk the children as she had no idea what else they might encounter.

"Let's go then." I said.

We stepped into the cold, clear stream. The water flowed faster than I thought. I stepped onto the stream's soft bottom - and nearly lost my balance as the current swept around me. Thankfully, Mrs. Rose stabilized me before that could happen.

"Brrrr." I shivered.

The water felt ice cold, even through my jeans. But it was shallow, as Marissa had said. It came up only a few inches above my boots. I took another step, leaning forward, trying to balance against the

stream's fast current. One more step, and we would both be halfway across the stream.

"Oh!" I cried out when I realized I couldn't take the next step.

"What happened?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Hey!" Marissa exclaimed. I saw her struggling, too. "I'm stuck!"

"The bottom is so soft!" I cried as I worked to pull my foot up from the mud.

My hiking boots had sunk below the surface of the muddy bottom. I leaned down And pulled my leg up. But it wouldn't budge. I grabbed my leg with both hands and tried to tug my foot out from the bottom of the muddy stream.

No.

"We-we're sinking!" Marissa wailed. "Look! We're sinking fast!"

"No, you're not." Mrs. Rose said as she lifted us, freeing us from the muddy bottom.

"Thanks, Mrs. Rose." We said.

"You're welcome. Now come on."

Nodding, we were about to continue but couldn't when we felt our feet get stuck again. The water came up to our knees now. It seemed to be rising quickly. But I knew the water wasn't going up. I was heading down.

"Not again." Marissa said.

"Pull off your boots and swim for it!" I said.

We both bent over and struggled to reach our hiking boots. But they were buried too deeply in the mud. The water rose over my waist. If I

kept sinking, it would be over my head in a few minutes.

Booom! Booom!

The thundering footsteps made the water ripple. The dark shadow spread over the stream.

"Look!" Marissa cried. She pointed to the other shore. I turned to the shore - so close. But so far away. I squinted into the shadows to see what she was gawking at.

"What is it?" I cried.

"A big plug. In the stream bottom. Like a bathtub drain plug. This stream isn't real, either. It's a fake."

"The water feels plenty real!" I exclaimed, feeling myself sink even deeper into the mud.

"But Marissa is right. It could drain the lake." Mrs. Rose said as she pulled us out of the mud but with much more effort this time. It felt like something was pulling us down. "Remove your hiking boots and try to stay afloat. I'll go for the plug."

"Hopefully, it is a plug." Marissa said as we watched Mrs. Rose dive into the water and head for the plug.

Boooom! Booooom!

"Hopefully." I said as we did our best to remove our hiking boots. But it was hard to do so without floating away or getting stuck in the mud again. "I think we failed Ivanna's test."

"Noooo!" Marissa shouted when she nearly lost her balance. But I managed to steady her.

The deepening shadow moved over us. I turned back and raised my eyes to the shore. I saw the creatures lurching toward us and

opened my mouth in an ear-shattering scream of horror. At first, I thought I was seeing black clouds floating low over the trees.

But then I realized the bobbing shapes were too dark to be clouds. Too dark and too solid. And then I saw the three pairs of yellow eyes. And I recognized the shapes of the heads. And I knew I was staring at cats.

Cats!

Black cats. Huge heads rose over the trees. Tails curling up like smoke from chimneys. Three giant black cats, their paws thundering over the forest, shaking the ground and the trees. Their yellow eyes locked on Marissa and me.

"They're... not real!" Marissa murmured. "Not real... not real."

She had stopped thrashing the water and stood now perfectly still, staring back at the enormous cats, repeating the words like a chant. Trees crunched and fell. The three cats thundered their way to the shore. Marissa was now pale white. But it wasn't from the cold water; it was because of fear of the giant cats.

"Noooo..." A low wail escaped Marissa's throat.

I struggled to breathe. My chest ached. My head started to spin. The cats pulled back their lips in a terrifying hiss. I saw rows of sharp teeth. I saw their yellow eyes narrow menacingly. Tossing back their heads in another hiss, the creatures arched their backs. The black fur on their backs stood straight up.

"Okay. I'm back. The plug wasn't... real. Wow." Mrs said, surprised at seeing the three giant cats.

"Wh-what are they going to do?" Marissa stammered. I opened my mouth to answer her, but only a tiny squeak escaped. The water flowed past my shoulders. I raised my hands out of the water, trying to keep from sinking under. "What are they going to do?"

We didn't have to wait long to find out. Before we could even cry out, the cat heads came swooping down at us. The jaws opened wide. The curled and jagged teeth slid apart. I turned and tried to squirm and wriggle away. But I couldn't move fast enough. Water splashed over my face. Then I felt teeth clamp shut on the back of my sweatshirt. Sputtering, gasping for breath, I felt myself lifted up. I felt the cat's hot breath on my neck and the back of my head. The teeth held me firmly, plucking me up, up out of the stream.

"JUSTIN!" Mrs. Rose and Marissa shouted.

"Whoooooa!" I finally found my voice. The cat dangled me high in the air. My arms and legs thrashed wildly. The cat tossed its head, swinging me from side to side.

"Helllp! Ohhh, help!" Marissa shouted.

Looking down, I saw that Mrs. Rose was trying her best to help Marissa avoid getting grabbed by the cats while doing the same herself. However, the water made it more challenging. Soon, the other two cats managed to grab them and hoist them into the air. I tried to call out to them, but a burst of hot cat breath nearly suffocated me. I felt myself being lifted even higher as the cat rose up on its hind legs. A paw swung up and batted my side. The other paw batted me the other way.

'Does it think I'm a cat toy?' I wondered.

I didn't have time to think about it. I twisted dizzily as the cat played with me, batting me from side to side. Then, suddenly, I found myself being lowered. The jaws opened. I was falling now.

Into the water?

No.

I landed hard on my back on the shore. So hard that I bounced. Pain shot through my body. I ignored it and scrambled to my feet. My

heart pounding, my whole body shaking, I tried to run. But the cat grabbed me up again, its jaws closing around my right shoulder. As I sailed back up into the air, I saw Marissa falling through the air. I heard her cry out as she hit the ground. And then I saw the other black cat bend its head, open its jaws, and drag Marissa up in the air again.

Up and then down.

My body slammed hard on the shore. I gasped and struggled to my hands and knees. In time to be picked up again and dangled over the water. Marissa, Mrs. Rose, and I hung over the stream. Then, once more, we were dropped to the shore.

"Oww!" I bounced hard. I stared up as the cat lowered its massive head to pick me up again.

"What are they doing?" Marissa screeched. "Why are they doing this?"

"One of the reasons why I prefer dogs over cats. They are playing with their food." Mrs. Rose shouted, trying to free herself.

Real World

"You know dogs also play with their food, right?" Blake asked, slightly annoyed.

"Yes, but nowhere near as much as cats. And nowhere near as messy." Summer said.

"Is that why you got us a dog instead of a cat?" Yang asked, curious.

"That's only part of the reason." Summer answered. "But speaking of pets, can someone bring in Zwei and... the Ghost Dog?"

"I got it." Ruby said before using her semblance to head to the back and return a second later with Zwei in her arms. "Okay."

"What about the Ghost Dog?" Coco asked, raising an eyebrow. However, everyone went stiff when they heard the familiar growl of the Ghost Dog. Turning to where it came from, they saw that the Ghost Dog had snuck past them and was now lying down near the counter.

"Well, that answers that." Weiss said.

"Well, one of the questions anyway." Velvet said.

"So, was everything in the Fantasy Forest fake?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"I want to say yes, but I'm not sure. But most things were." Summer answered.

"Like the plug?" Nora asked.

"Yes. I wonder why it was even there. There was nothing behind it."

"Maybe to give false hope or something like that since it was a survival test." Jaune said.

"Maybe."

"Do you know what time it was when this was happening?" Weiss asked.

"I would say it was a bit past midday. But specifically the time, I'm not sure."

"But after everything was done, were the kids okay? This 'adventure' must have traumatized them since they were only twelve and not training to be huntsmen." Pyrrha asked.

"They were alright. A bit shaken from the whole experience, but they were still fine for the most part. They did have a few nightmares, but those went away only a few days later." Summer answered. Now that she thought about it, Summer had to admit those kids were braver than she had initially expected. Still, she wasn't too thrilled

that the creator of those machines scared Justin and Marissa half to death. "Anyway. I'm almost done with the story. As we dangled above the stream, I tried to come up with a way to free us while ensuring the kids' safety. Luckily, Justin came up with a plan."

Story

"Whoooooaaa!" My stomach lurched as I felt myself being swooped up into the air again. A black cat's paw swiped at me and sent me swinging.

"They-they're going to eat us?" Marissa called.

"We must look like mice to them!" Mrs. Rose said, struggling to get free.

And then I had an idea. The cat tossed its head and sent me flying. It caught me between its enormous paws. The paws squeezed my middle so hard I thought my head might pop off! But as I struggled to breathe, my idea gave me hope.

'Do I have time?' I wondered. *'Can I do it before this cat swallows me whole?'*

The cat tossed me up again, then caught me between its teeth. Pain shot down my back. My whole body tingled and ached. With a groan, I twisted my body. I reached behind me and struggled to grab the backpack. If I can unzip it, maybe I can reach the mechanical mice I stuffed inside and switch some of them on. Hopefully, the mice will distract the two cats, which would allow us to escape.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

But I had to try something. Or else, in a few seconds, we would be catchow. The cat's tongue swept over the back of my neck. I cried out in pain. The tongue felt as rough as sandpaper! Hot cat breath stung my neck. I grabbed the backpack with one hand and started to tug it around to my chest. But the cat opened its jaws. The rough

tongue bumped me from behind. And I went flying back to the ground. I landed hard on my hands and knees. Pain shot through me once again. I felt like collapsing in the dirt.

But I knew I couldn't give up. The cat leaned over me, hissing with each breath. Yellow eyes gleamed down at me hungrily. Ignoring the pain, I grabbed the backpack. I pulled the straps off my shoulder. Then I swung the pack around to my chest and gripped it tightly with both hands.

"Got to get the mice." I muttered. "Got to get the kitty cat some mice to play with. Aaaaagh!"

My hands were trembling so hard, that I couldn't work the zipper. I let out a frustrated cry just as the cat swooped me up in its jaws again. I tried to call out to Marissa or Mrs. Rose. I wanted to tell them to hold on. I wanted to tell them that I had a plan. High in the air, I gripped the backpack with my right hand and reached for the zipper with my left. Please. Please! I prayed silently. Let me get the mice out. Let me click them on.

"My only chance." I muttered, struggling with the backpack zipper. "Our only chance."

A burst of hot cat breath made me shudder. Once again, I felt the dry, scratchy tongue scrape the back of my neck. But I cheered once I finally managed to open the backpack. I shot my hand excitedly into the backpack. I felt the furry mechanical creatures inside. I started to wrap my fingers around one. But the cat swung me hard, tossed back its head, and flung me into the air.

"Noooooo!" I let out a long wail and felt the backpack fly out of my hands.

I frantically grabbed at it but missed. Then I tried to snare it on my foot. Yet, I still missed and watched the backpack sail to the ground. It bounced once. Twice. Then, lay in the dirt near the shore. The cat caught me in its teeth. I felt the sharp points dig into my skin. Then

the jaws opened. And I started to slide. Down the scratchy tongue. Down, down into the cat's cavern of a mouth.

"Sorry, guys. We are doomed." I muttered.

The ground disappeared from view as I slid further down the cat's rough tongue. On my stomach, I reached out with both hands and grabbed the two curved eyeteeth. They felt warm and sticky in my hands. With a hard tug, I pulled myself part of the way up. I crawled a little way on the tongue. Then I gave another tug, and my head poked out from the cat's open mouth.

"That's it, Justin. We're not out yet." Mrs. Rose shouted.

Turning as much as I could, I felt a sense of relief flood through me when I saw that she now had my backpack. But fear replaced it when I searched for Marissa but didn't see her. Had she already been swallowed? Beneath me, the tongue bucked and curled. The cat was trying to force me down. But I held tightly onto the eyeteeth.

"You cats want to play? THEN PLAY WITH THESE!" Mrs. Rose shouted.

Turning as much as I could again, I saw that she had activated a couple of mice and thrown them on the ground, where they began moving around. Would the cats see them? Would they care? The cat chomped its teeth together. I cried out in pain, and my hands slid off the eyeteeth. The tongue rolled beneath me. I started to slide again. The mouth closed over me, shutting me in darkness.

"No! No, no, no, no!" My voice sounded tiny and muffled inside the cat's mouth.

And then, to my shock, the sunlight poured back in as the jaws popped open. The tongue pushed me forward, past the teeth and then the lips. I sucked in a deep breath of cool, fresh air. And then I went flying from the cat's mouth. I landed on my back on the ground next to Marissa and Mrs. Rose. She gaped at me in surprise, her

eyes wild, her red hair tangled and matted wetly to her head. We all scrambled to our feet in time to see the giant black cats pounce. They both leaped at the same mechanical mouse. Hissing and clawing at each other, they began to fight over it.

"MOVE!" Mrs. Rose shouted. She then grabbed our bags before grabbing our hands. Marissa and I looked back in amazement at the giant cats wrestling, hissing, and scratching with each other.

"Hopefully, they don't figure out they are fake mice." Marissa said.

"Yeah. Otherwise, they might come back after us." I said.

"That's why we need to get out of here." Mrs. Rose said.

"But are the cats real?" Marissa demanded, still gazing at them in amazement. "Are the cats real? Or fake?"

"Who cares?" I shrieked. "Let's get out of here!"

Once again, we started running through the forest. Which way were we headed? We didn't pay any attention. We just wanted to get as far away from those cats as we could. My clothes felt wet and sticky from being inside of the cat's mouth. But the cool, fresh air felt good against my skin and helped to dry me off. Our shadows leaned ahead of us as if leading the way. I heard strange animal calls that sounded like shrill laughter. And I heard the flapping of wings above the trees.

But Marissa and I ignored all the sounds. We kept running, following Mrs. Rose, as we pushed tall weeds and shrubs out of the way. We didn't speak. We didn't even look at each other. We ran side by side, keeping each other in sight, helping each other through the tangled forest. We were both breathless when we reached a round, grassy clearing. White and yellow moths floated silently over the swaying grass.

"GUYS! Look!" I shouted, pointing to the other side of the clearing. A small cabin stood under the trees where the grass ended.

A very familiar cabin!

"It's Ivanna's!" Marissa exclaimed happily. "We made it! We're back!"

"Hopefully, we can get some answers now." Mrs. Rose said, glaring at the cabin before muttering. "And maybe a shower. This is gross."

'Yeah. A shower sounds nice.' I thought. I sucked in a deep breath before we all raced toward the cabin.

"Ivanna! Ivanna!" Marissa and I shouted as the cabin drew nearer. She didn't come out. So I grabbed the door and pushed it open.

"Ivanna! We're back!" I cried happily.

"IVANNA! ARE YOU HERE!? CAN YOU HEAR US?" Mrs. Rose shouted, suddenly on edge by how quiet it was. I glanced quickly around the room, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. Marissa pushed me aside as she burst into the small kitchen.

"We survived!" Marissa exclaimed. "Ivanna - is the test over? Did we pass it? We-"

We all went quiet when we saw Ivanna seated at the small wooden table. She sat stooped over, her head on the table. Her horned helmet had fallen off. It lay on its side on the table. Her long blond braids had come undone and fallen over her face.

"Ivanna? Can you hear me?" Mrs. Rose asked, racing over to Ivanna and placing her fingers on Ivanna's neck to check for a pulse.

"Is she asleep?" I asked.

"Ivanna?" Marissa called. "We're back!"

The woman didn't stir.

"I don't feel a pulse. Damn. I wish I had my scroll or brought more medical supplies with me." Mrs. Rose said.

I heard a whimper from the back of the room. Squinting into the shadows, I saw Silverdog. He was huddled sadly against the wall, his head on the floor between his paws. He let out another whimper.

"Justin - something is wrong here." Marissa whispered.

"Ivanna! Ivanna!" I shouted her name. But she still didn't move. However, when I did, the dog whimpered sadly. "Something is definitely wrong here."

"You two are right. Something is not right. Look." Mrs. Rose said, pointing to Ivanna's back.

"Wh-what's wrong?" Marissa stammered.

"Take a look for yourselves." Mrs. Rose said, motioning for us to come closer. Gulping, we did and approached them. And what we saw caused our mouths to go slack as we both stared at the metal object poking out from the back of Ivanna's dress.

A large metal key.

I worked up my courage and crept up behind Ivanna.

My heart pounding, I leaned down and examined the big key.

"It-it's a windup key!" I stammered. Marissa opened her mouth, but no sound came out. I took the key in both hands and turned it one click. Ivanna's head bobbed up, then fell back to the table.

"Yes. Which means someone created her. And that also means that this whole survival test was probably fake." Mrs. Rose said.

"Do you think whoever made her also made those cats and mice?" Marissa asked.

"Probably." Mrs. Rose answered.

Ivanna's hands had drooped to the floor at her sides. I reached down and grabbed one of them. It felt soft and spongy, like it was stuffed with cotton or something. I let the hand drop to the floor and turned back to Marissa and Mrs. Rose.

"So what now?" I asked, swallowing again. "Ivanna is fake."

"Then what is real?" Marissa demanded in a tiny voice. "This is so scary. Is it all part of a test, or what? How do we get out of here now? How do we find Dad? If Ivanna isn't real, then who is?"

"We are. And so if your father, who is probably worried sick right now. So, let's take a quick break, gather whatever might help us that's inside the cabin, and then leave." Mrs. Rose said.

Sighing, I just nodded my head as Mrs. Rose gave a better answer than I could ever give. Well, if I could give an answer since I didn't know how to answer Marissa's question. I felt as frightened as she did. My eyes fell on Silverdog back in the corner. The dog had his head buried in his paws. He whimpered softly. Then, suddenly, the dog's ears perked up. He raised his head, his eyes flashing excitedly. I heard a sharp growl behind me.

"Hey!" I spun around as the door swung open with a growling, snarling creature bursting in.

Luka!

"No!" Marissa shrieked, backing away when Luka's gaze settled on her. A pleased grin was on his wild face. Luka tossed back his long hair with a shake of his head. He opened his mouth in a long howl. He leaped into the center of the room and tossed back his head in a roar. Luka then tried to leap at us, but Mrs. Rose threw him back.

"Stay behind me." Mrs. Rose said as she got out her scythe.

"Luka! Stop! Don't hurt us!" I begged. Luka's grin faded. He lowered his arms. He narrowed his dark eyes at me.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Luka said softly. "Especially not when you have a fully-fledged huntress with you. I might know how to fight, but I'm nowhere near her level."

Marissa and I stared back at him in shock.

"You - you can talk?" I stammered.

"Yes. I can talk. And the first thing I want to say is, congratulations!" Luka said, smiling.

"Congratulations?! FOR WHAT!?" Mrs. Rose shouted, flabbergasted. Luka stepped across the room, walking upright like a human. He shook hands with us.

"Congratulations all of you." Luka said warmly. "You passed the test."

"But - but -" I could only sputter.

"TEST! WHAT TEST!?" Mrs. Rose shouted, now furious. Luka peeled a long strip of fur off his arm. Then he pulled the fur from around his neck.

"I'm happy to get this stuff off. It's so hot and itchy - especially when you're running around like a wild man in the forest." Luka said.

"You're going to be losing a lot more than that in a second if you don't tell me what is going on." Mrs. Rose threatened.

"I'm very confused." I confessed.

"Ivanna isn't real." Marrisa said, pointing to Ivanna.

"Seeing as I like having skin my person, I'll explain to you everything. No, Ivanna isn't real. I built her myself. Just as I built all the creatures you found in my Fantasy Forest."

"Why?" Mrs. Rose asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why did you build all that?" I asked.

"As a test." Luka replied simply. He stepped up behind Ivanna and pulled her up into a sitting position. Luka brushed the dummy's hair behind her head with his hand before propping the helmet back on her head.

"For?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"So many people come to the forest. They come searching for all kinds of treasures. Just as you two have." Luka answered. "My family has lived in this forest for hundreds of years. It became our job to protect many of the treasures. And so we built a test forest to keep out those who were unworthy. To stop the people who don't deserve the wonderful treasures."

"You built the entire forest?" Marissa asked.

"Just the part that isn't real." Luka answered, shaking his head

"And how did we pass the test?" I asked.

"By discovering what was real and what wasn't. By surviving and triumphing over the unreal."

"Why did you build Ivanna?" Marissa asked.

"She is my best creation. She keeps everyone from guessing that I am in charge here. No one believes that a wild wolf man runs the Fantasy Forest. It makes it so easy for me to watch everyone and see how they do on my test." Luka proudly answered.

"That is an interesting diversion. And an understandable one if you want to keep people from figuring out that you were in charge." Mrs. Rose said, slightly impressed. It all seemed very mysterious to me. But I was too happy it was all over to argue with him.

"And now I shall give you the treasure you came for." Luka announced. He turned quickly and disappeared into the back.

"I can't believe it!" I whispered. "He's giving us the silver chest containing the Lost Legend! Dad is going to be so amazed!"

"We're going to be rich and famous!" Marissa exclaimed. "And Dad won't be able to tell us we're not helpful - ever again!"

"Don't forget. You two are still going to get punished for chasing after Silverdog without waiting for me." Mrs. Rose said, a devious smirk on her face. Marissa's and my expressions fell flat as we knew Mrs. Rose was right. A few seconds later, Luka returned carrying a small silver chest.

"Congratulations again." Luka said. "I am happy to award you the ancient treasure that you came here to seek. And I wish you good fortune with it."

He placed the silver chest in my hands. It felt lighter than I expected. The silver gleamed in the light from the candle on the table. My heart pounded. My hands trembled. I suddenly felt so excited that I nearly dropped the silver chest! To think that I held the Lost Legend in my hands!

"Thank you," I managed to choke out.

"Yes, thank you," Marissa said.

"But now, if you could be so kind as to help us find the kids' father again, we would appreciate it." Mrs. Rose said. Luka snapped his fingers, causing Silverdog to come running to us.

"Silverdog will lead you back to your camp." Luka announced. "Stay close behind him, and he will protect you. Well, more alert you than anything since you have a huntress with you."

"Uh... alert us to what?" I asked, gripping the chest tightly.

"There are many thieves in the forest. Some of them are real, and some of them are not real. But they all would steal your treasure and make it their own."

"Thank you for telling us this." Mrs. Rose said.

"We'll stay close to Silverdog." I promised.

We thanked Luka again. Then we followed the big white dog out of the cabin and back into the forest. The afternoon sun had started to lower itself behind the trees. It cast an orange glow over the forest floor. The air had already begun to carry an evening chill.

Trotting steadily, the big dog kept his furry tail up high as he led the way, like a flag for us to follow. I carried the chest carefully between my hands and kept my eyes on the dog. Marissa followed close behind while Mrs. Rose was in the back, on the lookout for thieves.

We walked along a curving path through a patch of tall yellow weeds. Then, we made our way around a high clump of evergreen bushes. On the other side of the bushes, Silverdog led us onto a leaf-covered path. Our boots crunched over the path as we hurried to keep up with the trotting dog.

I gripped the silver chest tightly. I couldn't wait to pull open the lid and gaze at the Lost Legend. To take it out and start to read it. What was the Legend about? Who wrote it? And when was it written? So many questions. And I knew they would all be answered as soon as we opened the chest and removed the Legend from its hiding place of five hundred years. The sun lowered itself behind the trees. Our shadows grew longer. The leaves crunched underfoot.

"Oh! Wait! Wait!" I cried out when I heard leaves crunching behind us.

Silverdog trotted on ahead of us. But Marissa, Mrs. Rose, and I stopped. We stopped and listened. We listened to the crunching

footsteps creeping up fast from the trees behind us. I felt a chill of fear sweep down my back.

"We're being followed." I whispered.

"Luka warned us about thieves." Marissa whispered.

The crunching footsteps came closer. I tucked the silver chest under one arm as if protecting a football. My throat tightened. I could barely breathe. I turned and saw Silverdog trotting on up ahead; his tail still raised behind him. The dog disappeared behind a clump of tall weeds.

"We can't just stand here." Marissa whispered.

"You two can't. Go and hide in the bushes that Silverdog went through. I'll confront the thieves." Mrs. Rose said as the footsteps were approaching faster now.

Any moment, I knew, some thief - or several thieves - would burst out of the trees and grab the chest away from us. I turned to the tall weeds. I couldn't see the dog at all now. I knew Maria and I couldn't outrun the thieves or fight them. Our best chance was to hide and wait for Mrs. Rose to deal with them. And it would be easier for her if she didn't have to keep an eye on us. Plus, by hiding, it would make it easier to keep an eye on the silver chest.

Was it a good idea?

A terrible idea?

Was there a better one?

We had no time to think about it. We had to move. We both spun around and ran to the trees as the footsteps grew louder. Would we be safe hiding in the bushes? Would it be safer in the trees? But ultimately, it didn't matter. As soon as we got into the bushes, we

heard the footsteps stop. For a moment, we were worried for Mrs. Rose but calmed down when we heard her voice.

"Justin. Marissa. It's safe. You can come out now." Mrs. Rose shouted. Curious, we peeked out from the bushes and smiled at who we saw.

"DAD!" Marissa and I shouted when we saw our father next to Mrs. Rose. Getting up, we exited the bushes and ran to him.

"Dad!" I cried.

"Dad!" Marissa echoed. "I don't believe it!"

"I don't believe it, either!" Dad shouted, smiling.

"Where have you been? Why did you run away? I've been searching the forest for you! Where were you?"

"It's a very long story." Mrs. Rose answered. "And it's something that you must hear later."

"Right." Dad said, nodding at Mrs. Rose for some reason. And for some reason, Marissa and I felt a shiver go down our spines. But it left when he turned back to us and smiled. "So, what kind of adventure did you three have?"

"A weird one." Marissa answered.

"Yes. But we also have a legend." I said, showing Dad the chest, causing his mouth to drop open.

"It's - a silver chest!" Dad exclaimed.

"It's the silver chest!" I told him. "The silver chest we came to Brovania to find!"

"Is that the one that contains the Lost Legend?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Y-yes. But - but - how?" Dad asked. I never saw Dad so confused. Or so excited. "The Legend of the Lost Legend. This is the most thrilling moment of my life."

"What about having your kids?" Mrs. Rose asked, chuckling.

"Alright. Second most thrilling. But still. How did you do this? How did you find this ancient chest? How did you-?"

"Mrs. Rose told you, Dad. It's a very long story." I said.

"At least you can't say we weren't helpful!" Marissa chimed in.

All four of us laughed.

"Do you realize what this will mean to us? Do you realize what a thrilling discovery this is?" Dad asked, lowering his voice to a whisper. He dropped down to his knees to admire the chest. He tenderly ran his hands over the smooth silver of the lid. "Beautiful. Beautiful."

"Can we open it?" Marissa asked, dropping down on the ground beside him. "Please, Dad? Can we open it and see the Lost Legend?"

"We have to see it!" I exclaimed eagerly. "We have to!"

"Yes. We have to! Believe me, I'm even more impatient to see it than you two are!" Dad laughed. He bent over the chest. I saw his hands tremble as he lowered them to the silver clasp. "Beautiful. Beautiful."

Dad's hands closed around the clasp. He turned it, then gave a sharp tug. Slowly, slowly, he pulled open the lid. And all four of us leaned close and gazed into the chest. We leaned so close over the chest that our heads touched.

"I - I don't believe it!" I gasped.

"What is it?" Marissa shrieked.

"Wait. I thought the Lost Legend was a manuscript?" Mrs. Rose asked, confused. Dad's mouth dropped open. He narrowed his eyes and gazed into the chest. He didn't say a word.

"It's supposed to be." Marissa answered.

"But It-it's an egg!" I finally stammered. The four of us were staring down at a large yellow egg with brown speckles.

"But where is the Lost Legend?" Marissa demanded. "This can't be it!"

"This isn't the right silver chest." Dad said, shaking his head. He reached inside and carefully lifted the egg. Then he felt around on the bottom of the chest with his free hand. Dad examined the egg, rolling it slowly between his hands. Then, he carefully lowered it back into the chest. "Nothing else in here. Just an egg."

"But we all passed the test!" I wailed. "Luka said he would give us what we came here for!"

"Who is Luka?" Dad asked as he carefully closed the clasp on the chest.

"Luka is the one who created this ridiculous test that we had to pass to claim the 'treasure' that he said we were looking for." Mrs. Rose answered. "Either he didn't actually know the treasure we were looking for, or he lied."

"Where can we find him?" Dad asked, climbing to his feet. Before I could answer, I heard a rustling sound across the clearing. I turned to see Silverdog come trotting out of the weeds.

"Silverdog!" I cried. I rushed forward and petted the dog's big head and the fur around his neck. "Take us back to Luka! Luka! Take us to Luka!"

"Does the dog belong to... Luka?" Dad asked Mrs. Rose.

"Yes. Luka ordered Silverdog to guide us back to the camp. And we were on our way there when we heard your footsteps." Mrs. Rose answered.

"Can he actually take us back to Luka?"

"I want to say yes, but I'm not so sure anymore."

"Luka!" I repeated. Silverdog wagged his tail. Did that mean he understood? "Take us to Luka!"

Still wagging his bushy tail, the big dog headed past us to the trees. Dad picked up the silver chest. And the four of us followed the dog back through the forest. We hadn't traveled far from the little cabin. A few minutes later, it came into view. And Luka must have seen us coming as he exited the cabin with a surprised look on his face.

"I didn't expect to see you back here." He said, shaking out his long, dark hair. "Did you get lost?"

"No. Not exactly," Marissa replied.

"This is our dad. We finally found him." I said as Dad and Luka shook hands.

"Well, why did you come back here?" Luka demanded. He lowered his gaze to the silver chest in Dad's hands. "I gave you what you came here for."

"Not exactly. Either you mixed up the contents of the chest on accident or did not know what we were looking for." Mrs. Rose said.

"Yes. An egg was in the chest." Dad said.

"Yes, I know." Luka said, scratching his jaw.

"But we didn't come here for an egg!" I protested.

"You didn't come to the forest in search of the Eternal Egg of Truth?" Luka asked, confused.

"No. We didn't even know there was an Eternal Egg of Truth." Mrs. Rose said.

"Dad brought us here to find the Legend of the Lost Legend."

"Oops! I made a little accident." Luka said, shifting slightly.

"That's okay." Dad said softly. "Everyone makes mistakes."

"As long as they own up to their mistakes and promise to do better in the future." Mrs. Rose added.

"I'm so sorry. I usually get it right. I really thought you were searching for the Eternal Egg of Truth." Luka shook his head. Still shaking his head, he took the silver chest from Dad's hands. Luka carried it into the cabin. A few seconds later, he returned. "A thousand apologies."

"But can you help us find the Lost Legend, as that is what we were originally looking for? Do you have it?" Mrs. Rose asked.

"Do I have it?" The question seemed to surprise Luka. "No. I don't have it. I think it will be very hard to get it."

"Why? Would we need to pass another test?" Mrs. Rose asked, not looking forward to another one. And Marissa and I felt the same.

"Do you know where it is?" Dad asked.

"Yes. I can direct you to the people who have the Lost Legend. But I do not think they will part with it. They have been wandering the forest with it for five hundred years. I do not think they will want to give it to you - for any price." Luka answered.

"I-I just want to talk with them!" Dad cried excitedly. "I just want to see it with my own eyes!"

"Go in this direction." Luka said. "Cross two streams, and you will probably find them on a wide, stone clearing. They wander the forest. They never stay in the same place for long. But I think you will find them in the stone clearing if you hurry."

"Thank you!" Dad cried, shaking Luka's hand.

We all thanked Luka. Then we hurried off in the direction he had pointed. We were so excited that we were all talking at the same time. Well, Marissa, Dad, and me. Mrs. Rose seemed content just to listen. That or maybe she was happy that her assignment was almost over. I remember Dad saying that Mrs. Rose had a family. Maybe she was eager to go home after all that had happened.

"Do you think they'll be friendly?" Marrisa asked.

"Do you think they'll let us see the Lost Legend?" I asked.

"Do you think they'll let me borrow it?" Dad asked. "If I could only borrow it for a few weeks..."

"I don't think they might be willing to part with it since Luka implied it was important to them." Mrs. Rose said.

"Luka also said they might not be friendly. He said they might not part with it - for any price." Marissa said.

The journey across the two streams was not difficult. We walked for only an hour. We were still talking excitedly as we drew near their camp. We stopped on a low hill overlooking a wide patch of stony ground.

The stone clearing.

We could see rows of small tents made of animal hides. Several people dressed in brown robes worked to build a fire in the center of the clearing. A bunch of scrawny gray dogs wrestled and snapped at each other at the edge of the clearing.

"I can't believe it." Dad exclaimed, his eyes searching the small tent village. "I can't believe these wanderers actually have the Lost Legend."

"But will they let us see it?" I asked.

"Only one way to find out." Mrs. Rose answered. Dad led the way down the hill.

"Hello there!" Dad called out to the wanderers. "Hello! Hello there! Hello!"

As we stepped onto the stone ground, the scrawny gray dogs stopped wrestling. Barking furiously, they came scurrying up to greet us. They lowered their heads, bared their jagged teeth, and growled. We all stopped when we saw three men in brown robes come running out of tents. They quickly shooed the dogs away. The men, I saw, were as scrawny as the dogs.

"Hello." Dad greeted them warmly. "I am Professor Richard Clarke, and this is Justin and Marissa."

"Hello." Marissa and I said.

"And this Mrs. Rose." Dad said, pointing to Mrs. Rose.

"Hello." Mrs. Rose said, smiling.

The three men nodded solemnly. But they did not speak. Two of them were bald. One had long, wavy white hair and a bushy white mustache. Marissa and I exchanged glances. I could see that she was as frightened as I was. These brown-robed wanderers did not look friendly.

"How did you find us?" The white-haired man asked in a cold tone.

"Someone directed us to you." Mrs. Rose answered.

"Why have you come here, Professor Clarke?" the wanderer asked.

"We're searching for the Legend of the Lost Legend." Dad answered. The three men all gasped in shock. They leaned close and whispered furiously to each other. When they finished their excited conversation, they turned back to us. But they didn't speak.

"Something is not right." I heard Mrs. Rose mutter.

"Do you have it?" Dad asked eagerly. "Do you have the Lost Legend?"

"Yes. Yes, we have it." the white-haired man replied. He whispered something to the two bald men. They spun around, their long robes twirling with them, and hurried away. A few seconds later, they returned. One of them carried a small silver chest.

"Oh, my goodness!" Dad declared, his eyes bulging. "Is that it? Is that really it? Is that the Lost Legend?"

"Yes." The white-haired man replied. "Do you want it?"

"Huh?" Marissa, Dad, and I asked, shocked. The wanderer shoved the chest into my hands. I was so shocked I nearly dropped it!

"It is yours." The white-haired man said. He stepped back.

"Just like that? No catch? No bartering?" Mrs. Rose asked, skeptical.

"No. No catch. No need for bartering."

"Are you sure?" Dad asked. "Are you sure you want to give it to us?"

"Yes. Take it." The man replied quickly. "Goodbye."

He and the other two turned and walked quickly back to their tents. To our surprise, they instantly began to pack up. Dozens of wanderers began pulling up tents, packing up supplies, and putting out the campfire. In minutes, they had scurried away. The stone clearing stood bare. No sign they had ever been there. They were so

fast that even Mrs. Rose had trouble accepting what had just happened.

"How strange," Dad said. "How totally strange."

"Strange is an understatement." Mrs. Rose said. We began to walk away from the clearing. I think all four of us were in shock or something. I know I was completely stunned.

"They handed the treasure over to us without a word." Dad said, rubbing his beard. "Why did they do that? Why did they give this treasure to us without asking for anything in return? I just can't believe it."

"Let's open the chest. Let's take a look." I said after a while.

"Yes!" Dad agreed. He took the chest from me and carefully set it down on the ground. "I am so surprised - so stunned - I guess I don't know what I'm doing!"

"Let's see it then." Mrs. Rose said, chuckling.

Carefully, Dad unlatched the lid and opened the chest. Then he reached inside - and pulled out a manuscript. It was a thick stack of yellowed paper with tiny black writing all over it.

"Yes!" Dad whispered happily. He gripped the ancient Legend tightly in both hands and held it down so that we could see it. "Yes!"

"Wow!" Marissa cried. "It really looks five hundred years old - doesn't it?"

"Dad, what does it say on the top page?" I asked, struggling to make out the words.

"Uh... let's see." Dad said. He raised the manuscript close to his face, squinted hard at the tiny words, and then read them out loud:

"WHOEVER OWNS THE LOST LEGEND WILL BE LOST FOREVER."

"Huh? What does that mean?" I cried.

"It doesn't really mean anything. It's just part of the Legend." Dad answered.

"Are you sure?" Marissa demanded in a trembling voice.

"Just because it is a legend does not mean it is not true. Many times, legends are true." Mrs. Rose said.

"Lost forever." Dad muttered as he examined the manuscript. "Whoever owns the Lost Legend will be lost forever."

"Hey - where are we?" Marissa asked. We raised our eyes to the trees that surrounded us. All four of us gazed around at the strange, dark trees. We had wandered away from the stone clearing.

Now, nothing looked familiar.

"Where are we?" Dad repeated.

"We-we're lost." I whispered.

Real World

"It took us a while to fully come to grips with the fact that we were now lost forever because of that damn manuscript. After that, we tried to make the most of our situation. And it remained like that for years. The end." Summer said as she finished her story. "But now that is all in the past since you freed me from that prison and reunited me with my daughters!"

"We missed you too, mom." Yang and Ruby said, hugging Summer.

"Wow. It must have been torture for you, knowing that you would be lost forever and never be able to see your family again." Coco said.

"It was. It really was."

"After realizing it, did you ever try to see if you could find Luka?" Pyrrha asked.

"We tried several times. But we found nothing."

"Do you know if it is because the Legend of the Lost Legend changed your surroundings so you can never find anything familiar?" Jaune asked.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I would say yes since we rarely saw anything familiar."

"Alright."

"But speaking of Luka, did you or Mr. Clarke know that there were other treasures there?" Weiss asked.

"No. That was a surprise for the both of us. I should say this, though. At first, we thought Luka was simply there to protect some treasures in the forest and just knew about the Legend of the Lost Legend. However, as time moved on, we think he had more to do with the Lost Legend than he let on because of how he knew about the previous prisoners." Summer said.

"Did you come across any of Luka's inventions?" Ren asked.

"Or other creatures?" Yatsuhashi asked.

"No. We didn't come across any of Luka's inventions. As for other creatures, yes. We came across plenty of wildlife. And, as you might have expected, we had to use a lot of them for sustenance. But the strange part, there was always enough of them, along with fruits and vegetables, to sustain us." Summer answered.

"Did you ever get sick or injured?" Nora asked.

"Yes. We often got sick or injured. Luckily, we had a few medical supplies on hand, and I knew wilderness survival tactics, which included how to treat others. But strangely, we were always near what I needed to treat the injury or to make homemade medicine to cure a sickness whenever it happened."

"Well, you guys did say that someone must always have the Lost Legend. And if they died, then technically, no one would have it. So, maybe the Lost Legend provided just enough so none of you would perish until the next people arrive to take it." Velvet said.

"Possibly. I'm just glad I found a way to write down everything I knew before you guys saved me. That way, the others can continue to care for themselves."

"But on the topic of Mr. Clarke and his children. Do you think you will ever see them again?" Blake asked.

"And will we ever be able to rescue them?" Yang asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe we will see them, or maybe not. Perhaps we will rescue them, or some poor, unfortunate soul will take their place down the road. And that could happen today or one hundred years from now since apparently no one ages when they have Lost Legend." Summer answered.

"Not to mention, as Summer and I have already said, someone must always have the Lost Legend. We can find a way to free Mr. Clarke and his children, but someone else must take their place. It is possible to get some criminal to take their place, but we would also have to devise a way to stop others from accidentally freeing them. Basically, it is feasible, but it is a long shot." Jaune added.

"But that doesn't mean we can't try, right?" Ruby asked.

"Of course, my little rose. We can try to free Mr. Clarke and his children while making sure the one that takes their place is someone who deserves to be in that kind of prison. It will just take time and

lots of planning." Summer assured with a smile. However, that smile soon turned devious. "But now that the story is finished."

"Oh, no." Yang and Ruby said, eyes growing wide in fear while Blake and Weiss sat upright. Everyone smirked at the tone of Summer's voice. Even the Ghost Dog lifted its head to better listen in on the conversation.

"You all must tell me all about my daughter's adventurers at Beacon." Summer said, smirking at her daughter's horrified expressions.

"Oh, we have tons." Blake said.

"But first, let's go easy on them. We'll start off with Ruby accidentally blowing herself up during class, and then we'll move on to Yang's motorcycle accident." Weiss said.

"Good. Let's hear them." Summer said.

"Coco. Think you can make everyone some more coffee?" Velvet asked, getting comfy next to her boyfriend.

"On it." Coco answered, getting up as Blake and Weiss began telling their stories while Ruby and Yang blushed brightly.

Notes: Next chapter will be with The Ghost Next Door with Glynda.